NIKOLAI CHUKOVSKY

Baltic SKIES

The Baltic skies of this story are the skies over bombed and blockaded Leningrad in World War II.

In their heroic defence of the city the pilots of Rassokhin and Lunin's squadron overcame the initial technical superiority of the enemy air force, the bitter frosts and sleepless nights with almost superhuman courage, a courage that in many cases cost them their lives.

Yet Chukovsky never allows us to forget the human side. Although he is describing the rigorous life of people at war, he writes with considerable intimacy and restraint.

After reading this book one is not surprised to learn that the author himself took part in the defence of Leningrad.

Born in Leningrad in 1904, Nikolai Chukovsky is the son of the well-known literary scholar, translator and children's writer Kornei Chukovsky.

Nikolai Chukovsky began his literary career by writing poetry and translating Mark Twain and Robert Louis Stevenson into Russian. In 1930 two important events occurred in his life. He completed his studies at the Institute of the History of the Arts and published his first story *Youth*, to be followed later by the novels *Fame*, *The Prince's Corner*, *Yaroslavl*, *Summer*, and other.

For nearly eight years after 1939 Chukovsky served as an officer in the Soviet air force and reported for air-force newspapers. The experience of these years inspired him to write ***Baltic Skies***, a novel that has earned him wide popularity.

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NIKOLAI CHUKOVSKY

Baltic SKIES

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow

НИКОЛАЙ ЧУКОВСКИЙ

Балтийское НЕБО

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
Москва

Translated from the Russian
by R. DAGLISH
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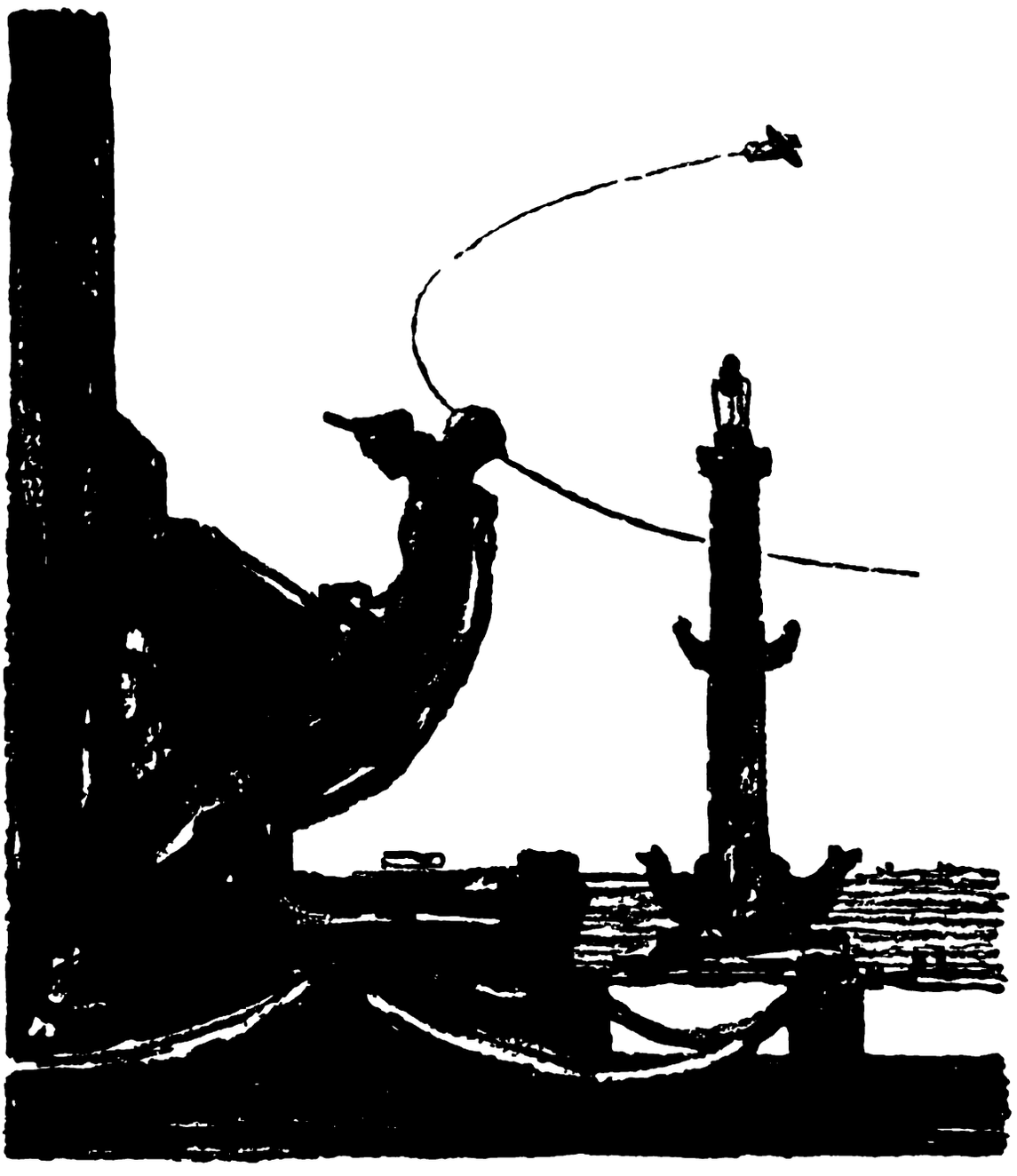


CHAPTER ONE

Maria Sergeyevna

I

Maria Sergeyevna Andreyeva, a little woman in a woollen dress, jumped down from a lorry outside Baltic Station, brushed the mud off her skirt and walked to the tram stop.

She had not been in town for over a month and there was anxious curiosity in her eyes as she looked about her at the familiar station square. For over a month she had

been digging anti-tank ditches, first in the Kingisepp District, then south of Oranienbaum, then, when the Germans took Peterhof and Strelna, outside the city itself, beyond the North Wharf and near the Leningrad typewriter factory. All this time she and tens of thousands of other women had slept in their clothes on the bare earth, living under constant air and artillery bombardment, with burning villages and trampled fields all round. There had been little news from the city, but she knew the Germans had been bombing it since the beginning of September and the front was very close. She had not been able to imagine quite how the city would look when she got back, but was sure it would have changed.

To her surprise, however, the city seemed much the same as usual. The station kiosks were selling fizzy drinks of various colours, little girls were drawing squares on the pavement and playing hopscotch, passers-by were eating choc-ices on little wooden sticks, a woman traffic regulator was wielding her baton cheerfully at the corner, the stagnant water in the Obvodny Canal was rainbowed with pools of oil, the trams clattered past in their usual docile fashion. Only in the sky, at a tremendous height, among light wisps of cloud, a curious white monogram had been woven on the blue by an aeroplane that she could scarcely see. Maria Sergeyevna did not know whether the plane was German or Soviet but the sight of it made her think of Kolya Serov.

She decided to go first to Vasilyevsky Island to see the Bystrovs, because she knew no one was expecting her at home. At the beginning of July she had sent her children Irina and Sergei with the local camping club to a place near Valdai.

All through July she had lived alone, waiting for the school where she taught Russian to be evacuated. The whole school, including the staff, was to be evacuated together.

That waiting had been agonizing for Maria Sergeyevna.

It was terrible to have nothing to do at such a time. At last, at the beginning of August, the day of departure was fixed and Maria Sergeyevna received instructions to report at school with her belongings. But when she did so, she was told the departure had been postponed for another two weeks. And then it turned out that someone had to be sent to dig trenches for ten days. Maria Sergeyevna volunteered at once, because it was unbearable to sit alone in her two empty rooms, waiting and doing nothing. Without even returning home, she set out for the trenches with the biology mistress Katerina Ilyinichna Bystrova.

The ten days passed but no one arrived to relieve them, and they had to stay on. After another ten days they happened to meet a teacher they knew from the Dzerzhinsky District, who told them their school had already left. And after yet another two weeks, a few days ago, a Messerschmitt had strafed the anti-tank ditch in which they and many other women were working, and had killed Katerina Ilyinichna before her eyes.

As a matter of fact Maria Sergeyevna had not known Katerina Ilyinichna very well. They taught different subjects to different forms. Katerina Ilyinichna was ten years older than Maria Sergeyevna, had kept rather aloof and seemed disinclined to form a friendship. But in the month they had spent together the two women had unexpectedly felt drawn to one another and become friends. And it had not been because they worked, slept and ate together, but because Katerina Ilyinichna had displayed such understanding gentleness towards Maria Sergeyevna on hearing the whole difficult story of her married life, her widowhood, and her new love.

Something had happened to Maria Sergeyevna that worried and upset her terribly, something that left her at a loss. In the spring, just before war broke out, she, the mother of two children, had surprised herself. She had fallen in love with Serov, an airman she had chanced to

meet not long before, and who, on top of everything else, was several years younger than herself.

She and her husband had at one time studied together at a teachers' training college; he had been in her year, and also a student of Russian. Before they married, their love had been involved and platonic, they knew each other thoroughly, they had mutual tastes, mutual attachments, friends, hopes. When they had graduated, they worked together, and they would probably have lived happily if he had not contracted tuberculosis. His health grew worse and worse, and for several years Maria Sergeyevna, first with one little child, then with two, looked after him, took him from one sanatorium or clinic to another, and worked herself to the limit of her strength to feed him as well as possible, to save him. In the end he became irritable and unreasonable and treated his wife with a kind of childish ruthlessness. And yet she was in despair when he died, and it took her a long time to get over her grief. Then she started work again, brought up her children, settled down, read much, and it seemed to her that her life had become fixed for ever. It never occurred to her that she might marry again. Her life was taken up entirely with work and the children.

She was a serious, unassuming, well-read woman and second love, unexpected as it was, frightened her. He was a man whose surroundings were different from hers—a military man, a flier. He lived all the time somewhere out in the country, on an aerodrome, doing work that was completely unfamiliar to her. She met him and fell in love with him passionately; she had never suspected that love could be like that. It was a devastating emotion and, above all, quite independent of Maria Sergeyevna's will.

And yet, when exactly a week before war broke out he proposed to her. she had the strength to refuse him. She refused him because she had two children, and because she was convinced that in spite of his affectionate words he could not really be in love with her, and in any case

could not love her for long. While telling Katerina Ilyinichna about this one night, Maria Sergeyevna had said it was clear "as twice two is four." But she could not say what a sad tenderness came over her at the thought of his big hands, his kind eyes, his rather round shoulders, and what a secret, timid hope was mingled with that tenderness.

They had seen each other seven or eight times, not more. The aerodrome where he lived was a long way out of town and he was free only on Sundays. In May and June he called for her every Sunday and they went out for walks. Those Sundays had been very difficult for her; she did not know what to say to their neighbour, or to her daughter Irina, who was already in her ninth year. He, too, did not know how to behave with Irina; he addressed her formally and rocked Sergei on his knee with an embarrassed smile.

After her refusal Maria Sergeyevna had thought she would never see him any more. But deep down she still hoped timidly that he would call again the following Sunday. And he did call, and when he came in, she was radiant. She could not hide her joy. That had been June 22. They listened to Molotov's speech together. An hour later he left.

Maria Sergeyevna went with him on the tram as far as Baltic Station. They rode along the Obvodny Canal. He was paler than usual, and very quiet, and while they stood on the platform at the end of the tram, he did not let go her hand for a minute. She looked up at him and tried to guess what he was thinking, but it was impossible, and she felt horrified that she knew him so little.

They were overwhelmed and scarcely spoke. All she could do was to try and remember his face.

Just before leaving he said: "Take care of yourself."

He bent down and kissed her on the lips.

Then he stepped into the carriage and the train started.

She walked home on foot, right across the city, petrified with grief.

And she had never talked about him to anyone, except for that night when she somehow told it all to Katerina Ilyinichna.

They were lying in a barn; through the gaps in the roof there were stars. Exhausted by the day's work, women were sleeping all round them, huddling together to keep warm. And Maria Sergeyevna talked in a whisper all night, cried and talked. Maria Sergeyevna told Katerina Ilyinichna everything, without concealment, trusting her completely and full of gratitude because Katerina Ilyinichna was staying awake all night for her sake, and because for some reason she seemed to regard all Maria Sergeyevna's doubts as trifles. When she had heard everything, Katerina Ilyinichna with the confidence of an older and more experienced woman said that it was only a matter of being able to wait and they would be sure to see each other again.

"If you both stay alive," she added.

The next day Katerina Ilyinichna was killed.

Maria Sergeyevna had rarely been to Vasilyevsky Island and it took her some time to find the block of flats where the Bystrovs lived. The huge six-storey block stood in a quiet, narrow side-street, behind the buildings of the Academy of Sciences and the University. At the end of the street she glimpsed the embankment of the Little Neva, light-coloured water, barges. Maria Sergeyevna ran her eyes up the whole six storeys and halted.

She had no idea how she would tell Katerina Ilyinichna's family of her death. She had never visited them and did not know them at all. She had heard that Katerina Ilyinichna's husband was at the front. There were children. The boy was still quite young, probably no older than Irina. And a daughter. Katerina Ilyinichna had often said: "My daughter's quite grown up now." She must be about eighteen. Katerina Ilyinichna was forty, she could

have had an eighteen-year-old daughter. What was the girl's name? Sonya, it seemed. And they had Katerina Ilyinichna's father living with them. He worked at some institute or other, must be very old. . . .

Maria Sergeyevna glanced at the scrap of paper with the Bystrovs' address on it. Flat 28, back entrance on the right, fifth floor. Maria Sergeyevna walked under a deep arch into the yard.

The yard was square and like a well, with sunlight falling diagonally across it. A thick white arrow on the wall indicated the entrance to an air-raid shelter. A crowd of children—cheerful, lively children—were dashing about the yard and the air rang with their cries. They were mostly boys and all rather small; but Maria Sergeyevna at once noticed a girl there, too, a long-legged girl, taller and noisier than all the others. They were playing hide-and-seek or perhaps it was tag. This long-legged girl, carried away by the fun of the game, nearly ran full tilt into Maria Sergeyevna, and Maria Sergeyevna noticed the black hair, the big mouth, the straight nose, the sprinkling of freckles on her cheeks, and the black eyes, filled with joy.

Maria Sergeyevna turned right, stopped at the entrance to the staircase and tried to pick out the windows of the flat she was to enter. High above, the windows were bathed in sunlight, just as in summer, and there were pigeons on the window-sills.

While she was looking up, she heard firm masculine footsteps behind her. She turned round. A naval officer was walking across the yard. At the sight of his tunic and the peaked cap pushed back on his head, Maria Sergeyevna started and caught her breath.

Kolya Serov also wore a naval officer's uniform. When she had first known him she had even considered him a sailor, not an airman. He had tried to explain that he was a naval airman, and had showed her some badges on his sleeve, but she had understood little of his explanations, because that side of him did not interest her. Since he had

gone away, every naval officer's uniform she saw made her start. The officer walked towards an entrance at the back of the yard. At the door he turned round and glanced at Maria Sergeyevna. He had a heavy, elderly face. In no way did he resemble Kolya Serov.

Maria Sergeyevna mounted the dimly-lighted staircase to the fifth floor. On the door of flat 28 there was a shining brass plate: "Professor Ilya Yakovlevich Mednikov." The name was printed in old-fashioned script. Maria Sergeyevna stood looking at the plate, trying to guess who this Mednikov was. Perhaps he shared the flat with the Bystrovs? His name was Ilya.... He must be Katerina Ilyinichna's father and Bystrova was her married name.

While Maria Sergeyevna hesitated at the door, footsteps sounded from below. Someone was running quickly up the stairs. Maria Sergeyevna glanced over the banisters and saw the girl who had nearly knocked her over in the yard. The girl was flying up the stairs, two at a time. When their eyes met, she cried: "Are you looking for us? I was sure you must be...."

Maria Sergeyevna waited for her at the top of the stairs. The girl reached the fifth floor, scarcely out of breath. She was Katerina Ilyinichna's daughter, of course, and Maria Sergeyevna wondered why she had not realized it before. Katerina Ilyinichna had been tall like this, and had the same dark hair, but there had been a lot of grey in it. And she had the same straight nose, the same broad mouth, the same eyebrows.... She can't be more than sixteen, Maria Sergeyevna thought. Perhaps not even that....

But the girl's eyes were no longer bright with the childish happiness that had filled them a few minutes ago. She surveyed Maria Sergeyevna with alarm, expectation, even a touch of severity.

"You're from Mummy, aren't you?" she asked quickly, mounting the last few steps.

Maria Sergeyevna nodded.

"I thought you had come from there," the girl went on.

"Your skirt's all muddy." She watched Maria Sergeyevna's face with mounting alarm. "What's happened to Mummy? What's wrong?"

"You must be Sonya . . ." Maria Sergeyevna began.

"She's dead?" the girl asked.

Maria Sergeyevna nodded again, astonished at such insight, and turned away.

She heard the girl breathing behind her. Not a sob, not a sigh. They stood like this for some time. Then Maria Sergeyevna felt in her pocket for a small packet tied with string. She took it out and turned round.

The girl's eyes were wide open and tears were trickling down her cheeks, gathering at her chin. But she seemed not to notice them.

"Was it a shell?" she asked.

„No," Maria Sergeyevna said. "We were machine-gunned by an aeroplane."

"When did it happen?"

Maria Sergeyevna thought for a moment.

"On Thursday. . . ."

"Have they buried her?"

"No. We were taken out of the ditch at once, and we never went back again. The Germans are there now. . . . So, you see. . . ."

She held out the packet. It contained a bundle of letters, a passport, three hundred-ruble notes, a photograph of a rather bald man in a grey suit—all that Katerina Ilyinichna had carried on her.

The girl took the packet and held it at arm's length, not even glancing at it. Big tears fell on the stone flags of the staircase landing.

Maria Sergeyevna touched the girl's shoulder gently.

Suddenly there were quiet footsteps on the other side of the door. The girl started, and her face at once became calm. She wiped her tears with her sleeve and pushed the packet under her blouse.

"Go away, please," she wispered hurriedly to Maria Sergeyevna. "Thank you. . . ."

Maria Sergeyevna had only descended a few steps when the door chain rattled, the door of flat 28 was flung open and a little man in a blue dressing-gown and soft red slippers appeared. He had a wizened, hook-nosed face with a moustache so grey it looked almost blue. He held himself straight, and his head in its black skull-cap was thrust back with dignity and even a trace of hauteur.

"From Katerina?" he asked sharply.

"Yes," the girl said calmly, getting between him and Maria Sergeyevna and trying not to let him out on the landing. "She's sent a message to say she'll be away for some time yet."

"I said it was too soon for us to leave," he said. "We shall wait for her."

The girl edged him carefully back into the flat and followed him in. The door shut with a bang.

2

Maria Sergeyevna lived in Mayakovsky Street. At one time it had been called Nadezhdinskaya Street, and before that, about a hundred years ago, the Street of the Six Shops. She got off the tram in the Nevsky Prospekt and turned into her home street. How well she knew it, even the cracks in the pavement. Looking about her attentively, she at once noticed that there had been more changes here during her absence than in the other parts of the city she had visited.

In the second house from the corner all the windows were out. As she passed the Snegiryov Nursing Home, she noticed a big gap in the wall and twisted iron bedsteads lying in the garden. On the other side, one of the white blocks in the Martyrs of the Revolution Hospital was half demolished. The house on the corner of Zhukovsky Street

was completely destroyed and there were only buckled iron girders sticking up out of the rubble. One wall of the house, the farthest from the corner, was still standing and from the street one could see inside the flats, as if they had been sliced open by a huge knife: the bright patches of green, yellow, and blue wall-paper, the photographs on the walls, a cupboard with no door and a jacket hanging inside, and right up on the top floor, a mirror reflecting the clear pale September sky.

It must have been a very big bomb that had fallen there, because all the windows were broken right as far as Nekrasov Street. Maria Sergeyevna quickened her pace, she was anxious to see her own house. Not that she was very worried. None of her family were living there and to value one's belongings now seemed absurd. Since the war started and Kolya Serov had gone away, and particularly since the children had gone, she had felt perhaps not free, but rather, as it were, unattached to anything. Every house was as dear to her as her own; she could live anywhere, with any kind of people, as she had lived in the barn while working on the defences, and everywhere she would feel at home. She knew that the struggle which had begun three months ago was now the only thing that mattered, and she wanted to take part in it as soon as possible. She would go back to the defence works and dig trenches, or she would get a job at a factory working for the front. But first she must go and see her children, get them settled, make sure they were safe....

After Nekrasov Street the windows were all right. She picked out her own house from a distance. It was undamaged, just the same as it had always been. At the gate she ran into the house manageress, who smiled and seemed about to say something, but Maria Sergeyevna went upstairs quickly to her own flat on the third floor, opened the door with her latchkey and went inside.

The flat consisted of three rooms. Two of them were Maria Sergeyevna's. The third was occupied by Anna Ste-

panovna, her neighbour, an old woman, very fond of life, very energetic, and unnaturally talkative. At one time Anna Stepanovna had had a husband, who used to work at some factory or other; she had daughters. But her husband had died long ago and the daughters were married and lived in other towns, and for fifteen years Anna Stepanovna had been living all by herself, on her pension. Maria Sergeyevna had often quarrelled with Anna Stepanovna because of her unbearable habit of interfering in everything—the cooking, the children's upbringing, Maria Sergeyevna's choice of friends. But these quarrels had never come to anything; they just seemed to end by themselves, because it was quite impossible to change Anna Stepanovna, who went on interfering regardless of any protest. And Maria Sergeyevna had got used to her, even valued her in her loneliness, and would probably have been very upset if Anna Stepanovna had suddenly disappeared.

Anna Stepanovna was not at home. Maria Sergeyevna unlocked the door of her own room. And at once she saw two letters that had been pushed under the door. They must have lain there for a long time, because both envelopes were coated with dust.

As she stooped to pick them up, Maria Sergeyevna realized they were both from Irina, her daughter.

Irina's letters must have come soon after Maria Sergeyevna had left; the postmarks were for the beginning of August. Frowning worriedly, Maria Sergeyevna opened the envelopes (Anna Stepanovna had been fiddling with them already!) and started to read.

From Irina's letters, written in a large childish hand on ruled paper, she learned only that Irina and her brother were well, went out gathering raspberries, and had been in the forest and caught a hedgehog that had lived for three days, then crawled under the stove and died. But she learned far more from the drawings of her five-year-old son that were also stuffed in the envelopes. All the

drawings were heavily pencilled aeroplanes, with big black crosses, and bombs falling from them.

She had only a vague idea of the position of the fronts and did not know very well where Valdai was, but had long ago realized that the front must lie somewhere near it. She had spoken to a soldier about it back at the defence works, but he had assured her that the Germans had not reached Valdai. Now, on seeing Sergei's drawings, she felt even more convinced that she must set out for Valdai without delay.

She was very tired, but she felt too worried to rest, and set to work at once. She must have a bath, wash a few clothes and get her things together. She lighted the stove to heat the water. When she had left, a month ago, she had forgotten to shut the window, and now both rooms were thick with dust. While she was waiting for the water to boil, she took off her jacket and shoes and started to scrub the floor.

She was still scrubbing when Anna Stepanovna came in. Maria Sergeyevna straightened up, pushing her hair back from her face, and Anna Stepanovna gave a gasp and at once started talking.

As usual, her conversation had no beginning and no end; it started from somewhere in the middle. To talk to Anna Stepanovna, as one did to other people, that is, to ask questions and give answers, was quite impossible. One could only listen. From morning till night Anna Stepanovna dragged her wizened little seventy-four-year-old body round all the backyards and staircases, pursued by a quite disinterested curiosity in the world at large. She saw everything, she heard everything, and when she started talking, she poured out all her discoveries in their initial state, without the slightest attempt to sort them out. She was delighted to see Maria Sergeyevna. Letting her veined hands that looked like pieces of dark carved oak fall to her sides, and peering in front of her with her kind, faded, lashless eyes, she started recounting everything that

had accumulated in her soul during the past twenty-four hours.

Of course, it was mainly about the bombing, because there had been a raid last night, and one yesterday afternoon, and another one the day before yesterday. Alexandrov, the ladies' hairdresser at No. 9, had been killed because he did not run outside. Everyone from No. 9 who had run outside was still alive, they had only been knocked down by the blast, and everyone who had stayed indoors had been killed. Only one person, the plumber, who had run outside had been killed by flying glass. One man had run out of the house and his wife and children had stayed at home. As soon as the bomb fell, he rushed back among the bricks and rubbish. He searched and searched everywhere, but couldn't find them. And the only thing left was a pair of galoshes, quite new ones, all shiny. He put on the galoshes, although it was quite dry, and walked away, didn't even cry, must have lost his voice, and everyone just stared at him. . . .

Maria Sergeyevna cautiously but firmly guided the conversation; she wanted to know when the school had left and where it had gone. With a patience born of long experience she waited until Anna Stepanovna had to clear her throat, and then hastily put in a word. And little by little, mention of the school began to crop up in Anna Stepanovna's discourse. It turned out she had long been under the impression that Maria Sergeyevna had left when the school left, and then someone had told her that the school's departure had been postponed and Maria Sergeyevna had gone away to dig trenches. She could never forgive herself for not knowing something and was very put out at the memory of her temporary lapse. The school had gone away about August 20, in the direction of Vologda, with further destination unknown. The school had been very lucky, it had been the last party to get through. Since then no one had been able to get out or get in. . . .

"How do you mean, no one can get out?" Maria Sergeyevna asked. "That's impossible!"

But Anna Stepanovna knew it for certain, and went into great detail about the people who had been living in trains for over two weeks just outside Moscow Station. There were masses of trains there, and the trains were full of people, and the people had settled down; they cooked their food, did their washing, kept waiting to be sent off, but still did not go. And many of them had got tired of waiting, and were going back home.

"But when will they be sent off?" Maria Sergeyevna asked.

"When there's a break-through," Anna Stepanovna said and glanced meaningly at Maria Sergeyevna. "Never mind, Yudenich got very close, too. But he didn't manage it, did he?"

With her own eyes Maria Sergeyevna had seen the Germans come right up to the city from the south-west. But that the city should be surrounded on all sides—she had never considered such a terrible possibility. True, out there, at the defence works, one woman had said all the railways were cut and the city had become a mousetrap; but her words had been greeted with such general hostility that she had shut her mouth, and Maria Sergeyevna had not believed her.

"But it can't be as bad as that, Anna Stepanovna! I'm leaving for Valdai tomorrow morning!"

The thought that there might be an impassable barrier between herself and her children made her feel quite desperate. But Anna Stepanovna stood her ground.

"You won't go, Maria Sergeyevna! I'm sure you won't," she repeated about twenty times.

Then she referred to such a great number of cases, reeled off such a huge list of names, with full particulars of profession, age, and family, that her words acquired a conviction that it was quite impossible to shake. Maria

Sergeyevna felt so weak that she could scarcely stand. She sat down on the edge of the bed.

"But why are you going to Valdai, Maria Sergeyevna?" Anna Stepanovna asked suddenly.

Maria Sergeyevna felt a rush of indignation. The old woman had lived with them ten years, peeped into every saucepan they possessed—and still you could not make her understand, the wooden dummy!

"What! Don't you know my children are in Valdai?"

Only then did the truth dawn on Anna Stepanovna. Her eyes sparkled with joyful anticipation.

"But Irina and Sergei are here. . . ."

"Where?" Maria Sergeyevna jumped to her feet.

"In Baskov Street. At the Torkunovs'."

Anna Stepanovna clasped her head in her hands and lamented. How could she have been so silly. Why hadn't she realized at once that Maria Sergeyevna did not know her children had been brought home long ago. And she had been surprised that Maria Sergeyevna wanted to go to Valdai! Why, the children had come back the same day the school left. There had been so much bombing they could not stay in Valdai. They had been brought back in order to go somewhere else, but they had never managed to get away again. The children had been sent home, but Maria Sergeyevna had been away digging trenches, so Irina and Sergei had been taken in by the Torkunovs.

The name, which Anna Stepanovna pronounced with such confident familiarity, was quite unknown to Maria Sergeyevna. She stood before Anna Stepanovna and kept saying: "Where? Where are they? Come on, come on! . . ."

And she wanted to rush out barefooted as she was, but Anna Stepanovna made her put her shoes on. Anna Stepanovna was in a great hurry herself and delighted to have a part in such a happy reunion, and to feel that Maria Sergeyevna's joy rested in her hands. While Maria Sergeyevna feverishly pulled on her stockings, she explained

that the Torkunovs lived quite near, in Baskov Street, that Torkunov himself was at the front, and that their daughter Lusya was the same age as Irina, and when the children came back from camp Lusya's mother had taken Irina and Sergei into her family.

They ran out of the flat and down the stairs, Anna Stepanovna, small and quick as a mouse, in front, Maria Sergeyevna just behind her. In the street it was already getting dark and the houses were wrapped in a bluish haze, but the sky was still bright and the white exhaust-trails of aircraft glinted in the sunlight. With no eyes for anything Maria Sergeyevna ran after Anna Stepanovna all the way to Baskov Street. A staircase, a door. They knocked. A tall strange woman opened to them and looked Maria Sergeyevna up and down rather severely. Maria Sergeyevna did not try to explain or ask questions. Behind the woman, at the back of the room, she had caught sight of Sergei playing with a toy lorry on the floor. She darted forward and whisked Sergei up in her arms. And at the same moment she noticed Irina with a big bow on her head that she had never worn before.

While Anna Stepanovna was pouring out the story to the tall woman in the hall, Maria Sergeyevna hugged the children, squeezed them, ruffled their hair, kissed them, and all three of them babbled incoherently, and the least coherent of all was Maria Sergeyevna herself. For two and a half months she had not seen her children. They were the same and yet not quite the same; they had changed. The summer in Valdai had done them good. They had grown and they looked stronger, particularly Sergei. His fair hair was bleached and lighter than his face, which was very sunburnt.

Torkunova tried to make Maria Sergeyevna stay for a cup of tea, but Maria Sergeyevna did not want to stay a minute longer. She was impatient to take the children home, so that she could have them alone, entirely to herself. She thanked her hurriedly, promised to call the next

day, kissed the other little girl Lusya and went off with Sergei and Irina. In one arm she carried Sergei and his toy lorry, in the other she held a bundle of clothes; Irina ran on ahead.

At home the first thing they had to do was arrange the black-out, for it was already time to light up. Fortunately, Anna Stepanovna had gone off to tell everyone what had happened, and Maria Sergeyevna was left alone with the children. The water boiled and she washed herself and the children. Then they had a meal of porridge and finished off with tea and ring-rolls. Sergei fell asleep without drinking his tea and Maria Sergeyevna carried him off to bed still clasping the lorry. In half an hour Irina was asleep too.

Maria Sergeyevna pottered about a little longer, tidying the room. She was blissfully tired. For over a month she had not slept in a good bed, on a mattress with clean sheets. She got into bed with a feeling of delight. There would be no need to travel tomorrow. The irregular clatter of anti-aircraft guns swelled, then died away again, like the yelping of a pack of hounds. But Maria Sergeyevna did not listen to it; she was listening to the even breathing of her children. What more did she want? No, she wanted nothing more for herself. As long as the children were with her!

Anna Stepanovna came back, opened the door of Maria Sergeyevna's room and stood in the doorway—in all their ten years together Maria Sergeyevna had never been able to make her knock.

"Are you asleep?" Anna Stepanovna asked.

Maria Sergeyevna opened her eyes.

"He called, you know," Anna Stepanovna said.

"Who?"

"That friend of yours. . . . The airman!"

Maria Sergeyevna sat up in bed.

"He called?" she repeated, almost in fright.

There was a buzzing in her ears. All the tranquillity of the evening had disappeared.

"He called and sat talking to me all the morning. He asked about you and the children. And I told him."

"What did you tell him?"

"Everything."

"Everything?"

"That the children were at camp and you had gone away with the school."

"With the school? But I didn't go away with the school!"

"At that time I thought you had. . . ."

"And he never called again?"

"Why should he? He thinks you're the other side of Vologda."

Muttering to herself Anna Stepanovna shuffled away to her room. Maria Sergeyevna lay quite still. So he did call!

CHAPTER TWO

Major Lunin

1

Ever since the war started, Konstantin Ignatyevich Lunin, a civil flying-school instructor in a town of South Russia, had been asking to be sent to the front. He was a compact, well-knit man of middle age, with clear blue eyes in a broad face, and baldness already making M-shaped "skids" above his temples. He had been in aviation since he was

quite young, had a great many flying hours to his credit, and had taught hundreds of young pilots, many of whom had become famous. There was some reluctance about giving qualified instructors permission to go to the front. But he was persistent and his request was granted. After a short spell in a reserve regiment, he was posted at the end of August to a naval fighter division in the Baltic.

Lunin received his posting in Moscow. On joining the service he was given the rank of major, probably because of his participation in the Civil War and his excellent flying qualifications. In a black peaked cap and a strange-feeling jacket with gold rings on his sleeve, a suitcase in his right hand and a rolled black greatcoat under his left arm, he set out for Leningrad Station, for it was only in Leningrad that he would learn exactly where his division was situated.

The carriage in which the station commandant found Lunin a seat was crowded with servicemen, but none of them were going far, few of them any farther than Kalinin. It was said that the train would not proceed beyond Kalinin because the line there had been damaged by bombing.

"You'd do better going through Vologda, Comrade Major," they said to Lunin. "The Vologda-Leningrad line's working without a hitch, it's still keeping to pre-war time-tables."

However, after waiting at Kalinin for several hours and changing nearly all its passengers, the train continued its journey. It went on slowly, stopping for hours at the most unexpected places. When the railwaymen were asked the reason for a stop, their invariable answer was:

"Line's under repair."

All round them forests had been set on fire by the combing. Fresh craters gaped all along the line. Twisted locomotives and shattered coaches lay in the bushes at the bottom of embankments. At Bologoye a heap of rubble was all that remained of the station buildings. The passengers expected to be bombed at any minute and they could

scarcely understand how the train had managed to survive and was still proceeding on its journey.

In the morning of the fourth day they crossed the bridge over the Volkhov and stopped at Chudovo Station. It was no more than a hundred kilometres to Leningrad. Chudovo was in flames; a huddled mass of people, carts, and cows was creeping along the roads. The train stayed there all day. And all day the roar of artillery slowly grew louder.

At first they thought the train was waiting for the bomb-damaged line ahead to be repaired. But presently it became known from the railwaymen that somewhere between Chudovo and Leningrad the Germans had reached the railway and cut it.

There were rumours that the train would return to Moscow. But it turned out that Chudovo was linked by a single-track railway with Kirishi, a station on the Rybinsk-Pestovo-Leningrad line. And in the evening, when it grew dark, the train pulled out north-eastwards along the left bank of the Volkhov, towards Kirishi.

At dawn, when they drew into Kirishi, they saw the muddy Volkhov with huge barges drifting slowly down it. The barges were black with people; children were crying, cattle lowing. The inhabitants of Novgorod were fleeing from the Germans and making downstream for Lake Ladoga. Then it became known that the Pestovo-Leningrad line had also been cut and Lunin realized that the Germans had got round Leningrad in the south.

The line along the Volkhov went on further to Volkhovstroi, where it crossed the railway linking Leningrad with Vologda. And after a long halt the train left Kirishi for Volkhovstroi, so as to turn off there for Leningrad. People said that this eastern route into Leningrad was still clear.

It was the sixth day of their journey. For three days they had been unable to break away from the front; forests were blazing all round and the rumble of firing

never ceased. At last Lunin saw through the carriage window a huge cascade that looked as if it had been cast in dull metal, and an apparently motionless cloud of spray at its base. It was the Volkhov Dam.

At Volkhovstroi they were told that the train would proceed not to Leningrad but to Vologda. That was the order.

Lunin picked up his suitcase and left the carriage.

The sidings at Volkhovstroi were crowded with trains. They were all facing in one direction, eastwards. They all wanted to cross the bridge over the Volkhov, but there were too many of them and the queue was slow. Machinery stood on open trucks; the carriages were packed with men, women, and children. They were all people from Leningrad, escaping along the last railway line that was left open. As he walked along the tracks talking to people here and there Lunin realized that they had all left Leningrad some days before. Not a single train had arrived from the west that day. There were rumours that at Mga Station, just half-way between Volkhovstroi and Leningrad, something had happened. What exactly had happened, no one could say, and whether it was still possible to reach Leningrad at all by rail remained in doubt.

While he wandered across the tracks, keeping in the shade of the carriages to avoid the hot evening sun that beat down on the heaps of slag in the yard, Lunin suddenly found himself standing near an engine wrapped in a cloud of steam. When the steam dispersed, he noticed that the engine was facing not in the direction of the bridge, like all the others, but westwards, in the direction of Leningrad.

An engine and tender, without a single coach behind it. An elderly, heavily-moustached engine-driver in a greasy cap was looking out of the cab window. On the long birch logs in the tender stood a naval man, an officer, and the gold rings on his cuffs gleamed dazzlingly in the sun.

The engine facing towards Leningrad and the naval

officer in the tender attracted Lunin's attention. He went up to the tender and halted. The naval officer was not a young man, his face was bony and narrow, and he was round-shouldered and so lean that his uniform hung on his body like a suit on a clothes hanger. He peered down at Lunin short-sightedly.

"Where are you making for?" Lunin asked.

"Leningrad."

"On this engine?"

"On whatever's going. So far it's an engine."

"Going through Mga?"

"We'll see when we get there."

The naval officer added something else, but the engine whistled, again became enveloped in steam, and Lunin did not catch what he said. The huge wheels of the engine slowly and gently began to turn.

"I'll come with you!..." Lunin shouted suddenly and grabbed the rail of the steep iron ladder up the side of the tender.

He himself was dumbfounded at his action and for a few seconds hung on by his arms alone. The naval officer held out his hand. It turned out to be thin and utterly weak. Lunin pushed it aside and climbed on to the tender.

The engine was already rattling over the points at full speed. The young fireman glanced disapprovingly at the two men in naval uniform, but said nothing. Lunin sat down on a log. He looked at the naval man, the naval man looked at him. Someone had to start the conversation.

"Have you come far?" the naval officer asked loudly to make his voice heard above the clank of the wheels.

"From the South. Azov Sea."

"Ever sailed on it?"

"No, never sailed anywhere," Lunin said with a laugh.

The other looked at him in surprise.

"What about your rings?" he asked embarrassedly. "I'm supposed to be a naval officer but I'm ashamed to say I

don't understand naval badges of rank. I only know army ones. Are you a lieutenant-commander?"

It was Lunin's turn to be surprised. He himself was not yet very certain about the badges of rank of the various services, but surely a naval officer ought to know.

"I am a major," Lunin said.

"A major?"

"Yes. I'm not a sailor, I'm a pilot. See this light-blue between the stripes. I used to be a civilian pilot, now I'm in the Fleet Air Arm. You're a commander, aren't you?"

"I see you aren't much better at it than I am. I'm a senior political instructor. And I've never been to sea either."

They both laughed.

"I'm a journalist," the dry-land sailor explained. "Editor of a district newspaper. I've just been given a uniform and sent to Leningrad for an appointment."

"I suppose you'll be appointed to some naval newspaper?"

"Perhaps. Let's introduce ourselves. My name's Khovrin."

Lunin gave his name.

"You may come from the South, but you've got a northern accent."

Lunin grinned.

"I was born in the Vologda Region," he explained.

"Been flying long?"

"Ever since I was a kid, more or less. I was dreaming of aeroplanes before I was ten. I wanted to fly on bull's bladders. I used to jump off the shed with cock's wings tied to my wrists. At twelve I made my first model and it flew about a hundred yards."

"When did you start flying yourself?"

"Soon after the Civil War, when the Voluntary Defence Corps started."

"What about passing up some wood, you fellows," the

fireman said, staring at something between Lunin and Khovrin.

Lunin agreed at once and started passing logs to the fireman. With difficulty Khovrin also picked up a log and passed it forward. Perspiration broke out on his forehead. After handling five logs he was exhausted. Pale in the face, he squatted down on his haunches.

You're not very strong, are you, Lunin thought to himself, continuing to pass the logs forward with unhurried ease.

The engine rushed along, straight into the sunset, not stopping at stations and whistling deafeningly at the turns. Everywhere was quiet and deserted. Lunin noticed that they had not met a single train coming in the other direction. Bomb craters showed up darkly now on the right, now on the left. It was getting dusk and everything was merging with the earth.

The driver suddenly applied his brakes and the engine halted at a small dark station building. The driver and his mate climbed out and disappeared somewhere behind the station. They did not return for nearly an hour. Darkness fell and it became quite cool. Sitting on a log in the tender, Lunin once again heard in the stillness a familiar rumble, the rumble of the front. Huge glowing spots with blurred edges dimmed the stars. Tongues of fire kept leaping up along the whole western horizon, revealing the jagged line of the forest.

At last the driver and his mate returned. The engine started and they continued their journey, now slowly and cautiously. They passed two stations. At the third they stopped.

"Get down," the driver's mate said to Lunin and Khovrin. "We shan't be going any farther."

Evidently he felt sorry for them as they climbed down from the tender and walked away into the darkness. "You can knock at any cottage round here," he shouted after them. "Anyone'll put you up for the night."

"Where's the main road?" Khovrin asked.

The driver poked his head out of the cab.

"Where are you making for? Leningrad?" he asked.

"That's right," Khovrin replied.

"There's no way through," said the driver. "The Germans have taken Mga."

"The main road runs north of Mga," his mate added. "Between the railway and Lake Ladoga, through Krasny Shum."

"If they've cut the railway, they must have cut the road," the driver said.

"Suppose they haven't," said Khovrin.

"Couldn't say," the driver replied cautiously. "It's not far to the road from here. About three miles."

They walked in the darkness past cottages with dark windows, then along a faint white road across the fields. They were both carrying suitcases: Khovrin a very small one, with difficulty, Lunin, a large, heavy one, with no difficulty at all.

"We must try the road," Khovrin said. "If only to satisfy our consciences."

At the main road a man in a military cap came up to them. Lunin flashed his torch on him. A second lieutenant, very short. He came to attention in front of Lunin and saluted.

"Are you waiting for transport to Volkhovstroi?" asked the lieutenant.

"No, to Leningrad," said Lunin.

The little lieutenant was silent while he tried to examine Lunin and Khovrin. Then he spoke again.

"I got to the road an hour and a half ago," he said. "Then there were plenty of lorries, coming through, one after the other. . . ."

"Going to Leningrad?" Khovrin asked.

"No, to Volkhovstroi," the lieutenant replied. "That's where I'm going. They say there hasn't been anything to Leningrad since noon. I went back into my dug-out

to get my things, did a bit of cleaning, and when I came out again, there was just nothing. Not a single lorry. I've been waiting forty minutes or more. . . ."

They sat down on the grass at the side of the road. Lunin looked at the stars. In the evening stillness all sounds were very clear and the gun-fire seemed to come from quite near. A shot, then an explosion. A shot, then an explosion. And all from one side, the west. At every explosion the air vibrated.

It was getting cold. The lieutenant put on his greatcoat.

"The wind's blowing off Lake Ladoga," he said.

"Is it far to the lake from here?" Lunin asked.

"No, quite near. Only a few miles."

They jumped to their feet because they had heard the sound of an approaching lorry. The lorry was coming from the direction of Leningrad. The lieutenant went out into the middle of the road to stop it.

"Flash your torch," he said to Lunin, "or it'll go past."

They saw the shape of a big lorry bearing down on them with its headlights off. Muffled figures swayed in the back. Lunin flashed his torch. The lieutenant jumped about and waved his arms. With a scream of brakes the lorry came to a halt.

About eight women with a tarpaulin round them looked down at them silently from the back. The driver got out of the cab and without a glance at anyone went round examining and feeling his tyres. It was a civilian lorry and the driver was also a civilian.

"From Leningrad?" Khovrin asked him, while the lieutenant climbed into the back.

The driver nodded.

"When did you leave?"

"Two o'clock this afternoon."

"What's it like there?"

"All right," the driver said firmly.

He straightened up and regarded Khovrin and Lunin attentively.

"It's all right there," he repeated. "But you can't get there any more. We're the last."

"How did you get through?" Lunin asked.

"We made it, but no one else will. The road's under fire. We were nearly hit four times. No one else will get through."

He climbed into the cab and the lorry moved off.

Lunin looked at Khovrin. How would this puny newspaperman act? Was it worth waiting? But Khovrin sat down again on the same spot. Lunin sat down beside him.

He now had a clear picture of what was happening round Leningrad. The Germans had got round the city in the south and cut its last railway. They were shelling its last road. At least, they had been shelling it an hour ago, now perhaps they had cut the road as well. From the road to the shore of Lake Ladoga it was only a few miles. The Germans would reach the lake and the circle would be closed.

In the north was the Finnish front, stretching from the Gulf of Finland to Lake Ladoga. In the west, the Gulf itself. In the south, the Germans. In the east, Ladoga. The part of the Karelian Isthmus occupied by Leningrad would become an island. Perhaps it already was an island.

They sat on the grass for a long time without speaking. The stars moved above them. Shot—explosion. Shot—explosion. To Lunin it seemed that the explosions were nearer now than before.

Suddenly a clattering noise in the distance reached their ears. It approached rapidly, not from the west, but from the east, from the direction of Volkhovstroi. Soon they realized it was a lorry. Something was clattering and clanging in the back.

The lorry loomed up out of the darkness so quickly that they scarcely got up in time. Lunin shone his torch and rushed shouting almost under the wheels. The lorry swept past, but about ten yards farther on braked and

came to a halt. They ran up to it. The driver opened the cab door and looked back at them.

Lunin flashed his torch on him. He was a soldier, very young, with a mischievous boyish face.

"Give us a lift," Khovrin said.

"Where are you for?"

"Where are *you* for?"

"You won't go where I'm going."

"How do you know?" Khovrin asked. "Where are you going?"

"To a big village."

"So are we," Khovrin said, heaving his suitcase into the back of the lorry.

Dazzled by the light of the torch, the driver eventually saw that he was speaking to officers. Addressing Lunin, as the senior of the two, he at once became serious and respectful.

"The road's blocked, Comrade Major."

"How will you manage then?"

"Oh, I'll manage somehow, I've got to."

"So have we," Khovrin said and climbed into the back.

The driver offered Lunin a seat in the cab, but Lunin refused.

"I'll be better in the fresh air," he said. "With my pal."

They sat down on some straw with their backs to the wall of the cab. The lorry raced on. A large empty petrol tank was clanging about in the back of the lorry. Every now and then either Khovrin or Lunin would kick it away with his feet, but the next minute it would roll towards them again. For a time they were completely absorbed in subduing this tank. But little by little what was going on around them diverted their attention so much that they forgot about it.

Shot—explosion. Shot—explosion. Now they could make out clearly that the guns were firing on the left and the shells bursting on the right. Both shots and shell-bursts were getting louder, but they realized that the lorry was

taking them towards the bursts, not the shots. The flashes of the exploding shells became so bright that Lunin would catch a glimpse of his own feet, the petrol tank, the tail-board of the lorry, and the road walled in on both sides by the forest.

Then a third sound was added to the roar of guns and the crash of bursting shells—a sickening, long drawn-out whine.

"What's that?" Khovrin asked.

He had apparently never heard the whine of a shell. Every time a gun fired, he crouched down and listened tensely until the shell exploded.

The lorry raced on at increasing speed, tossing them about on the matted straw. Now, instead of kicking the tank away, they only held it with their feet to stop it rolling over them. By this time the shells were bursting quite near and the explosions were deafening.

Then Lunin was suddenly flung into the air. He landed flat on his back in the bottom of the lorry. Stunned and blinded by the explosion, he felt the petrol tank roll over him. Earth showered down on him, spattering his face. He pushed the tank away and sat up, trying to understand whether he was still whole. It was hard to tell, for his body ached from head to foot. One thing was plain to him. He was still in the lorry and Khovrin was with him and they were rushing on.

Shell-bursts came one after the other, and by the light of the flashes Lunin could see the bare, mutilated shapes of trees. The tank seemed to have gone mad and hurled itself at them incessantly. Amid thunderous crashes and spurts of light they raced on and on.

Then Lunin was picked up and thrown against the side of the lorry, this time without any explosion. The whole front part of the lorry somehow bent downwards; it stopped with a shudder. And this sudden halt at such a time seemed more terrifying to them than anything else. Khovrin was the first to get up and look out over the cab.

"Got our front wheels in a crater," he said.

The lorry roared and jerked several times but failed to move. The door clicked and the young driver jumped out on the road. He shouted something to them, but Lunin did not hear him, because there was another shell-burst quite near. Khovrin fell backwards into the lorry and the driver vanished somewhere underneath. But a moment later he was up again and his head with forage-cap clamped on one side appeared over the side.

"Make for the trees!" he shouted.

"What about you?" Khovrin asked.

"Run for it! I'll follow you!" And he waved them away.

Khovrin threw out his little suitcase and jumped after it. Lunin followed him. They had run only a few paces through the forest when they again heard that horrible approaching whine.

"Down!" Lunin shouted.

As he fell, he gripped Khovrin's arm to pull him down. Out of the corner of his eye he saw huge tree-trunks, black against a background of flame, snapping apart like straw. Lunin thought of the driver. Where was he? Surely he hadn't stayed with his lorry? They got up and ran a few paces with their heads down, then threw themselves flat again. They had to fall every minute. At the sound of a shell they would fall flat, then, after the explosion, jump up and run on farther. Dew-laden alder branches lashed their faces. They tried to keep moving in the same direction as the road and not get too far away from it. Lunin thought painfully of the young driver who had tricked him and stayed out in the road with his lorry. Was he still alive?

"It's quieter now," Khovrin said.

It did seem a little quieter. The shells were bursting somewhere behind. Lunin and Khovrin did not have to fall so often. Either they had got out of the target area or the Germans had transferred their fire to another

sector. They bore to the left. The forest thinned and they came out again on the road.

"Well, let's walk it," Khovrin said.

But they had not walked a hundred yards when behind them they heard a familiar clattering noise—the empty petrol tank rolling about in the back of the lorry. Lunin stopped. The lorry rattled up out of the darkness. Lunin flashed his torch. The lorry pulled up and there was a click as the door opened.

"Still alive?" Lunin asked.

"Not half!" the driver answered happily, with triumph in his voice. "In you get!"

They got into the back again and the lorry raced on. The shells were now bursting far behind. A feeling of happiness and peace came over Lunin. Even the petrol tank no longer annoyed him. He felt Khovrin's head droop on to his shoulder. Khovrin was asleep. Holding the tank with his foot and trying not to wake Khovrin by moving, Lunin also fell asleep.

When he awoke, he saw that they were crossing a bridge over a broad river with the dawn reflected in it. He realized it was the Neva. After the bridge there was more forest.

And Lunin went to sleep again.

When he awoke a second time there were buildings all round and windows were shining in the sun.

"Soon be there," Khovrin said. "Ever been in Leningrad?"

"Only once," Lunin replied. "I spent a whole summer here. I was married in Leningrad."

"Is the wife still down south?"

Lunin frowned slightly.

"I haven't a wife," he said.

"Dead?"

"We separated."

They drove down a street with a red tram clanging beside them.

2

After saying good-bye to Khovrin and jumping down from the lorry, Lunin walked through the streets of Leningrad. He had to find the city commandant and learn from him the whereabouts of the division to which he had been posted.

The farther he went down the long straight streets, across bridges, along the embankments of canals, the more his feelings were stirred. Even the air of the city stirred him—fresh, sharp, moisture-laden air, through which both light and sound penetrated with unusual clarity. It was here he had met Lisa, here they used to walk together, all through those long light summer nights. Here he had got married.

The commandant's office was in Sadovaya Street, not far from the Engineers' Fortress. Lunin, being a sailor, was received by the deputy commandant, a grey-haired officer in naval uniform, lean, tall, restrained, polite, with brightly polished buttons and stiff starched cuffs, a little yellow from long usage, over his bony wrists. In those firm cuffs peeping out of the sleeves of his tunic, and even in those long fingers there was something special, something peculiar to Leningrad. Having examined Lunin's documents, the deputy commandant told him to report to Air Headquarters, Naval Branch. But when Lunin asked where Air Headquarters was, there was a pause. To Lunin's surprise, the deputy commandant appeared not to know himself the whereabouts of this large and important headquarters.

"Everything's on the move these days," he said.

Asking Lunin to wait, he went to the back of the room and held a long whispered conversation with one of his subordinates. Lunin made out clearly the word Peterhof. He almost decided that Air Headquarters must be at Peterhof, but instead of sending him there the deputy commandant went out into the next room and started

telephoning. When he returned, his subordinate said to him: "I told you the road there is blocked. They can't be there."

The deputy commandant advised Lunin to try and find the Air Staff representative at the Admiralty.

Lunin went out to the Nevsky Prospekt and saw in front of him the Admiralty spire. He felt the joy and pain of memory: "And bright is the Admiralty spire. . . ." Incidentally, the spire was not at all bright now. It had been painted a dark colour. So that it won't be such a landmark for the German air force and artillery, Lunin reflected. There was a damp sweetish smell of rotting leaves in the Admiralty gardens and this smell also seemed to him to have something peculiar to Leningrad about it. For several hours he looked and waited for the Air Staff representative, tramping about the huge edifice that Peter the Great had built, going down endless passages and through poorly-lit rooms with vaulted ceilings and hastily erected plywood partitions. The Air Staff representative did not say whether he knew where headquarters was, or not. He advised Lunin to report straight to his division; division headquarters would probably be at Poklonnaya Hill, the other side of Lesnoi.

To reach his division, Lunin got on a No. 9 tram and stood on the platform of the second car. Queer that he should be going to the front by tram, that there should be housewives returning from market and girl students from the Polytechnical College with him, and that the conductress, who had to fight a continuous battle with little boys jumping on the back, should ask him for the fare, like everybody else.

And at the same time he noticed everywhere indications that the front was near. The city was ready for defence. Deep ditches, lines of spikes and barbed wire stretched away down side-streets. The snouts of anti-aircraft guns poked out above fences. The windows of the corner houses had been bricked up, leaving only narrow

slits, which kept vigilant and silent watch over everything around them. All faces, however different, wore an expression of calm alertness.

In the corner of the tram, opposite the conductress, sat a man in army uniform with a long object in a tarpaulin case between his knees. At first Lunin thought it was some kind of musical instrument; the man's face had something of the musician about it, too. But on closer inspection Lunin realized that the case contained a rifle. What kind of rifle was it that had to be carried in a case? And suddenly Lunin understood. A sniper! Must be on his way to the front line, to his place of work....

At one of the stops in Lesnoi a man in a naval cap boarded the tram. His cap was like Lunin's, but instead of a tunic he was wearing a zip-fastened flying jacket, the kind often worn on airfields in summer. There were no badges of rank on his sleeve. He was a man of medium build, about thirty, with a round face and small, clever, attentive eyes. He halted on the platform in front of Lunin and with a friendly though rather restrained smile surveyed him all over—face, shoulders, tunic, suitcase. They went on for several stops like this, without speaking. Then the man in the flying jacket said: "This is where we get out, Major."

And Lunin followed him obediently.

Poklonnaya Hill turned out to be not a hill at all, but a huge pit, a hollow, the bottom of which was covered with the roofs of wooden summer bungalows. Lunin and his companion went down into it by a steep rough road.

"Flying-school instructor?" the man in the flying jacket asked, still inspecting Lunin out of the corner of his eye.

Lunin nodded.

"From the South?"

Lunin nodded again.

"Got them to send you to the front?"

"Yes."

"Broke through into the city in a lorry?"

How the hell does he know all about me, Lunin thought.

It was not difficult to find headquarters; telephone wires ran from all sides to one bungalow. But apparently there was still not enough of them, for there were several signallers near the bungalow, unwinding coils of wire. They were strangely dressed, a mixture of naval and army uniform. At the sight of Lunin's companion they stopped work and came to attention.

"Well, did you all get wet?" he asked.

"Yes, all of us," the signallers answered in chorus.

The airman stopped and surveyed them as attentively as he had recently surveyed Lunin.

"How are you fixed up?" he asked.

"We're fixed up all right," said one of the signallers, stepping out in front. "But we still haven't got any new kit. You see what we're going about in."

He was wearing an old buttonless army greatcoat over a naval vest.

"I'll speak to them about uniforms," the airman said.

He was silent for a moment, regarding the signaller's young, rather lean face with obvious pleasure.

"So you swam it, Ignatov.... That's good. How long did it take you?"

"For the first stretch I was four hours in the water, then I was picked up. Then I had another two hours of it and I was picked up again...."

"What about the girls?"

"Two are missing."

"Manya Sokolova?"

"Sokolova swam well. A Messerschmitt got her in the water."

The signaller spoke in a low voice, glancing sombrely at Lunin. He was obviously unwilling to talk in the presence of a stranger.

"This way, Major," the airman said to Lunin. "Go inside. I'll be with you in a moment."

Lunin walked across the little garden. Flame-coloured

dahlias were blooming outside the veranda. He mounted the steps and went in.

A young man was sitting at a cluster of telephones in his shirt-sleeves, sewing a clean collar on to his tunic. His boyish face was tanned almost black. At the sight of Lunin he bit off the thread with sound white teeth, put on his tunic and turned out to be a lieutenant.

Taking Lunin's papers, he looked through them and said he would report at once to the assistant chief of staff. He moved to the door of the next room with the papers in his hand, but at that moment the man Lunin had met in the tram entered the room. The lieutenant stopped short, came to attention, saluted and shouted:

"Attention!"

He was about to report: "Comrade Commissar. . . ."

But the other interrupted him with a bored wave of the hand.

So he's the division commissar, Lunin realized at last. Quite young!

"You've got a nice place here," the commissar said, glancing out of the open window at the dahlias.

"I don't know," the lieutenant replied. "Haven't had time to look round yet, we only got here yesterday. There were even more flowers in Tallinn."

"Who is the senior officer here?" the commissar asked.

"The assistant chief of staff."

"The chief of staff."

"The assistant. . . ."

"He is now the chief of staff," the commissar said firmly.

"What about the lieutenant colonel?" the lieutenant asked worriedly.

The commissar was silent.

"Was he drowned?"

The commissar nodded.

"Has it been verified?"

The commissar nodded again.

They stood for a long time, regarding each other in silence. Then the lieutenant drew himself up and asked in quite a different, completely official tone: "Do you wish to see the chief of staff, Comrade Commissar?"

"No, not at the moment," said the commissar. "I'll go and see how you've accommodated the men. Why is your signal company in this state?"

"They kicked off everything in the water. But the new uniforms for them have arrived."

"And when are you going to issue them?"

"As soon as supper's over. . . ."

As he left, the commissar held out his hand and introduced himself in anything but military fashion:

"Uvarov. Division commissar."

Lunin gave his name.

"We shall see more of each other, Comrade Lunin."

After the commissar had left, the lieutenant went in to see the chief of staff.

On his return he announced that Lunin had been ordered to report immediately to his regiment.

However, there turned out to be some doubt as to where exactly he was to go. All three squadrons of the regiment were in different places: One Squadron was on the south shore, Two Squadron on the north, Three Squadron in Kronstadt. Regiment headquarters was with One Squadron on the south shore. Lunin could not make out where that was, but evidently it was a difficult place to reach. The duty officer started telephoning regiment headquarters by way of a large number of intermediary stations. In doing so, he called up the Sun, the Moon and all seven of the planets. It took about forty minutes. All the time he kept shouting into the receiver: "Senior Lieutenant Tararaksin? Who's speaking? Is that Tararaksin?"

It was in this way that Lunin heard that name for the first time.

At last he got through. The commanding officer Major Proskuryakov ordered the newcomer to report to Two

Squadron and place himself at the disposal of Captain Rassokhin.

"Captain Rassokhin is commander of Two Squadron," the lieutenant said, accentuating the "captain," and looking at the major's rings on Lunin's sleeve.

He obviously wanted to draw Lunin's attention to the fact that Lunin, a major, would be subordinate to a captain. He looked keenly into Lunin's eyes and tried to guess what impression the news had made on him. But it meant nothing to Lunin. He felt himself a civilian and it seemed to him quite natural that every regular air-force man should be his superior.

3

A lorry was about to set off for Two Squadron and the duty officer put Lunin in with the driver. Lunin looked out of the window, trying to make out where they were going. He realized only that they were somewhere north of the city, between the city and the Finnish forces that had advanced from the north down the Karelian Isthmus until they were stopped on the Sestroretsk-Beloostrov line. He also realized that they were nearing the sea.

They passed innumerable deserted summer bungalows with flaming dahlia bushes round their verandas. At times the bungalows gave way to potato fields, where women were digging potatoes. Lunin kept looking ahead, expecting to see the sea, but twilight fell and the sea was still not visible. They had still not seen it when they drove on to the airfield.

It was, of course, not an airfield, but simply a clearing in a fir forest on the edge of a settlement of empty bungalows made fit for an aircraft to take off from it. In spite of the gathering dusk, Lunin's experienced eye at once noted the aircraft dispersed at various points round

the edge of the clearing, under the spreading branches of the fir-trees. There were six in all—I-16 fighters.

The driver pointed out the path leading to Rassokhin's headquarters and Lunin followed it alone, lugging his suitcase. The command post was situated on the fringe of the airfield, in a dug-out covered with turf that made it almost indistinguishable from the ground. A sailor in a round steel helmet with a tommy-gun slung across his belly stood at the entrance. He asked Lunin to wait and pressed a bell.

A minute later a stocky, well-built man, very short, in a flying suit and bare-headed, emerged from the dug-out. Feather-weight, Lunin thought to himself. The little man's face wore a troubled expression and he surveyed Lunin with some vexation.

He introduced himself, however, quite politely: "Senior Lieutenant Kabankov, Commissar of Two Squadron."

Lunin shook hands and gave his name.

"Are you to see the captain?" Kabankov asked.

"Yes, Captain Rassokhin," Lunin said.

A flash of annoyance again appeared on Kabankov's small, firm face. Looks as if I've arrived at the wrong time, Lunin thought.

"Are you from the division, Comrade Major?" Kabankov asked, hesitating at the entrance.

"Yes," Lunin replied and at once felt that Kabankov had misunderstood him. He had meant to say that he had been posted here from the division, but Kabankov had decided he was a representative of division headquarters. But Lunin had no chance to correct himself.

Kabankov led him down the steps, pushed the door open and took him along a dark underground passage. The floor was boarded and water bubbled under the boards. Kabankov opened another door and they found themselves in a small room dimly lighted by a smoky oil-lamp hanging on the wall. There was a sweetish smell of pine resin. The ceiling was low, Lunin nearly touched

it with his cap. The room had a second door, and two men in flying suits were standing near it, listening grimly to what was happening on the other side. They turned round as Kabankov and Lunin entered.

"Did you see him, Kab?" one of them asked in a whisper; he was a lad of about nineteen, with round, almost girlish cheeks.

Kabankov nodded.

"Is it true he lived another twenty minutes?"

"I don't know.... About eight, perhaps..." Kabankov whispered in reply and went up to the door. "He choked in his own blood. His chest was shot right through in two places. When they pulled him out of the aircraft, blood was spurting out of his mouth like a fountain."

"Did he say anything?" the young airman asked with boyish curiosity.

"No, nothing," Kabankov replied.

"Flew in across the sea with his chest all shot up!" the young airman said. "He kept right behind the captain and Serov, and didn't get off course once. I saw him, I was right at the back, behind Baiseitov. And the chap was already dying."

"His mechanic only guessed what was happening when he came in to land without putting his wheels down," said the second airman, who had been silent till now.

He was an older man, tall, lean, slightly stooped, with a kindly, sad, intelligent face.

"Made a good circuit but didn't put his wheels down and brought her in on her belly," he continued. "His undercarriage was all right, so it must have been that his strength gave out. He didn't lose consciousness until he landed. It was a fine landing. Only knocked the tail skid out of place. The mechanics will put that right tonight. The plane will be all right by tomorrow morning."

"Even so there's no one to fly it," Kabankov said.

He opened the door ajar and looked in. They all kept quiet. He opened the door wider.

Lunin also looked through the door and saw Captain Rassokhin.

Rassokhin was sitting at his desk. A big oil-lamp stood on it and his face was clear in the light. Broad cheek-bones, ginger eyebrows, freckled, roughish skin—the type usually known as tow-headed. Little wrinkles, dry as wood-chips, converged from all sides on his small, quickmoving, wide-set eyes. He was probably about thirty. A very rustic, peasant's face. And in the instant that Lunin saw it for the first time the face was a mask of fury.

Rassokhin did not notice Kabankov and Lunin in the doorway, perhaps because the light on his desk was too bright. His eyes, blazing with anger, were fixed on the man facing him on the other side of the desk.

The other man was a dark, handsome fellow, lean and straight, with a hooked nose, black hair, and black brows that joined at the bridge of his nose. From under these brows he was staring straight at Rassokhin's face. In his hands he was twisting and crumpling a flying helmet. Every few seconds he glanced round, as if afraid someone might be standing behind him, although nobody was.

"You left him very neatly," Rassokhin was saying, regarding him with hatred. "You were his second and you ought to have seen that no one got on his tail. And you just left him."

"I got the Junkers," the hook-nosed man said, looking at Rassokhin with his fine, slightly protruding eyes.

"I don't care a damn whether you got the Junkers!" Rassokhin shouted. He went pale with anger and the blemishes in his skin showed up even more plainly. "You went after the Junkers, and they shot him down. There is never any excuse for leaving your leader. Never!"

"I got the Junkers," the hook-nosed man repeated stubbornly and looked round.

Apparently he had repeated the phrase many times already.

Rassokhin brought his freckled fist down on the desk. He tried to shout but his voice choked with fury and he croaked:

"Get out!"

The hook-nosed man twisted his leather helmet into a thong and walked out of the room, pushing his way between Kabankov and Lunin.

"Comrade Captain," said Kabankov, obviously upset that this should have taken place in the presence of a stranger. "There's a major here from the division to see you."

Frowning in the light of the lamp, Rassokhin glanced at the door and saw Lunin. Noticing his major's rank, he stood up unhurriedly. He was a man of middle height, very compact and broad-shouldered. He regarded Lunin with the same expression of fury that he had levelled at the pilot with the hooked nose.

"I was told to report to you for duty, Comrade Captain," Lunin said, coming to attention and saluting.

At first Rassokhin did not understand and slowly examined the paper Lunin had brought with him from division headquarters. At length he grasped the situation and sat down.

Lunin took off his cap and wiped his damp forehead.

"Can you fly?" Rassokhin asked, surveying Lunin's thinning hair and rather bulky figure.

"Yes," Lunin replied.

Rassokhin's eyes narrowed and became derisive.

"Civil airways?"

"Yes."

"Ever flown in fighters?"

"Very little. In a reserve regiment."

"Ever been in battle?"

"No, not yet."

Lunin had no intention of mentioning his part in the Civil War.

"So you are our replacement?" Rassokhin asked, now quite openly ridiculing the idea. "Instead of Nikritin?"

Lunin was silent.

"Why are you the only one?" Rassokhin continued. "There are only five of us left. Didn't they tell you that?"

Lunin was silent.

Rassokhin also fell silent and pondered. And suddenly he said in quite a different tone, calmly and without a trace of mockery: "We'll give him Nikritin's plane. Eh, Kab?"

"There's no other," Kabankov said.

"Baiseitov!" Rassokhin shouted.

The hook-nosed pilot entered the room, came to attention and stared at Rassokhin with his black stubborn eyes.

"This is Major Lunin, he's going to fly Nikritin's plane," Rassokhin told him. "But I shan't give you to him. You'd get him killed. You'd get anybody killed, Baiseitov. I won't give you to anyone, I'll take you myself. You're going to be my second instead of Serov."

Baiseitov said nothing; he looked over his shoulder again, as if there were somebody behind him.

"That's that, Major. I'll give you Serov," Rassokhin continued. "He's been my second since the first day of the war and never let me down." Rassokhin's voice softened. "Serov!"

One of the pilots who had been listening outside the door entered the room; it was the older, round-shouldered one. He seemed clumsy in his huge fur flying boots.

"Well, Kolya, you and I are going to part company," said Rassokhin. "From now on your leader will be Major Lunin. He has come to us to command a pair in place of Nikritin."

"Very good, Comrade Captain," said Serov.

He was obviously disappointed. But perhaps because he did not want to hurt Lunin, he suddenly gave him a good-natured smile.

"Time for supper," Rassokhin said, glancing at his watch.

The four of them went to the mess together—Lunin, Serov, Baiseitov, and Junior Lieutenant Chepelkin, the young airman with the girlish cheeks who had asked Kabankov how long Nikritin had lived after landing. Baiseitov kept a little away from the others and suddenly began to sing with a slight Caucasian accent:

Either we'll die with glory, or a miracle achieve!...

He was still bristling, and evidently expected his messmates to speak to him. But they said nothing, and he said nothing, either. Every few paces he turned his head and glanced back.

Lunin carried his suitcase and did not try to start a conversation. He knew they were all thinking of the man who had been shot down. Only Serov glanced sideways at him now and then.

"Excuse me, Comrade Major," he said at last. "Are you Lunin, the famous airman?"

Lunin had never considered himself famous, so he decided Serov must have taken him for someone else. Serov looked embarrassed, but nevertheless referred uncertainly to a flight made some time back at the end of the twenties, and asked if Lunin had taken part in it. Lunin admitted that he had.

"There you are, you see, I said it was you!" Serov exclaimed joyfully. "There's only one Lunin. I've met a lot of your pupils. You're the famous Lunin."

Near the mess they were overtaken by Rassokhin. He was in a hurry, but as he passed Lunin, he asked:

"Are you from Vologda, Major?"

"I am."

"I guessed as much. The moment you opened your mouth. I'm from Vologda too."

"I thought you were," Lunin said.

Rassokhin smiled again, quickened his pace and left them behind. Evidently he wanted to soften the harshness with which he had greeted Lunin. But his eyes were still derisive.

The mess was in a small bungalow, with a veranda surrounded by crooked birch-trees which showed up whitely in the darkness. The windows were covered on the inside with black-out paper and a large oil-lamp shed its light on two tables arranged in the shape of a T and laid for six. Baiseitov, Chepelkin, and Serov took their places at the very end.

"Hilda!" Chepelkin called out. "Put a jerk in it!"

Lunin hesitated, not knowing which of the vacant places to take. Serov indicated a chair between himself and Baiseitov. Hilda, an Estonian girl, very small, with a rosy-cheeked doll-like face, brought in a tray of plates. The regiment had spent the first months of the war in Estonia and had brought her out with them.

She stopped in the doorway, looking at Lunin who had sat down between Baiseitov and Serov. There was horror in her eyes.

"Won't Lieutenant Nikritin be coming?" she asked.

Serov turned away.

"No," Chepelkin said grimly.

Tears ran down her cheeks and she could not wipe them because her hands were busy. She set down the tray on the edge of the table, covered her face with her apron and ran into the kitchen. But a minute later she came back, her face washed and calm, and placed a plate of meat and rice before each man.

Everyone ate in silence, except Baiseitov, who, without addressing anyone in particular, kept trying to start a conversation.

"There's nothing better than lone hunting!" he said with flashing eyes. "When you're hunting you're your own master."

He laughed loudly, then glanced round to see if there was anyone behind him. There was no response and he went on:

"Cars! I love hunting cars."

He laughed again, and again looked over his shoulder. No one said a word. He got up, leaving his plate almost

untouched, put on his helmet and walked out. At the door he ran into Kabankov. They passed each other in silence. Kabankov took his place next to Rassokhin's empty chair. He was so short that his feet did not reach the floor.

"Hilda!" he shouted. "Serve up, please!"

He twisted his right leg under him and sat on it. Sitting on his leg he seemed taller. Hilda brought him a plate of meat and took Baiseitov's plate.

"Baiseitov didn't eat anything?" Kabankov asked, swallowing hurriedly.

"Nothing," replied Chepelkin. "He was telling us how much he loved lone hunting."

"Who doesn't," Kabankov said.

"He did get the Junkers," Serov said mildly. "I saw it myself, and the spotters have confirmed it. He chased it and shot it down near Oranienbaum. The Junkers went down in the drink just by the pier."

"I've not the slightest doubt he got the Junkers," Kabankov said in annoyance. "But is that the way to do it? No, it is not. When you get a Junkers, you've got to do it in such a way that you don't lose a comrade who apart from anything else is a better man than yourself. . . ."

"That's it," Chepelkin affirmed.

"Just consider this," Kabankov went on, addressing Chepelkin. "We've been shooting down Junkers ever since June. The whole Baltic coast from East Prussia right up to Leningrad is littered with smashed Junkers. If we had paid for every Junkers we shot down with the life of a comrade, there would have been none of us left long ago."

They fell silent and only the clatter of forks could be heard.

"Did you notice how he keeps looking round?" Kabankov asked with a glance at Serov.

Serov nodded.

"He even looks round when he's eating," Chepelkin said.

"You and I know what that means," Kabankov continued, addressing Serov. "Remember Kuleshov?"

Serov nodded again.

"What does it mean?" Lunin asked.

"It means he's looking to see if a Messerschmitt's coming in on his tail," Kabankov said.

And seeing that Lunin did not understand, he explained: "It's nerves."

"He looks round every forty seconds, as you do in the air," Serov said. "You mustn't look round less than every forty seconds, in case a Messers gets on your tail."

"Kuleshov started looking round in the mess and the next day he was shot down," Chepelkin said.

He should not have said it. Kabankov looked at him grimly. Chepelkin's girlish cheeks reddened. No one said another word all through the supper.

When they left the mess it was quite dark. Lunin, who had had no sleep the night before, felt very tired. He was falling asleep as he walked. The pilots slept in the next bungalow, which they called in naval fashion "the cabin." It was also lighted with an oil-lamp. There were six beds, three on one side, three on the other. Baiseitov was already in bed, asleep. His swarthy face showed up darkly on the pillow.

As soon as they came in they sat down on their beds and began to undress, relieving themselves gratefully of boots and flying suits. They had young, well-knit, muscular bodies, well-developed chests. The little Kabankov was particularly well built, the muscles rippled under his skin like hawsers. But every man's face was grey with fatigue. They had not even the strength to talk. They fell asleep as they undressed.

Lunin put down his suitcase on the floor and hesitated. Two beds were vacant. He did not know which of them to take.

"That's the C.O.'s bed," Serov said, noticing Lunin's hesitation. "He sleeps mostly at the command post, but

he's got a bed here, too. You take this one, Comrade Major."

Lunin sat down on the bed and unbuttoned his tunic. A locker covered with a cloth stood at the head of the bed. A round mirror, letters in triangular envelopes, a faded, rather crumpled photograph of an elderly woman in a woollen shawl stood on the cloth. Lunin suddenly realized to whom these things, this bed had belonged. He rose and looked round, not knowing what to do.

Last night, Nikritin had slept between these sheets, he had looked in this mirror, this was a photograph of his mother. Everyone was already asleep, except Serov. He was lying in the next bed and the locker was between them. But Serov said nothing. Lunin undressed, got into bed and pulled up the sheet.

"Well, we're right outside Leningrad now," Serov said suddenly. "We can't go back another step."

"Any of your family in Leningrad?" Lunin asked.

"No, not now," Serov said. "She's gone," he added, and there was a tremor of anxiety in his voice. "I went to the flat and she had gone away with the children. . . ."

"Your children?" Lunin asked.

"Might as well call them mine. . . ."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven."

Lunin was considerably older, and he had no children.

4

"Keep off Messerschmitts! Don't go after single Junkers! The main thing is to stop them from making their runs!"

Rassokhin repeated this about ten times. When he had finished he asked:

"Understood everything?"

"Everything," Chepelkin answered.

Lunin had not quite understood, but he said nothing.

What did he mean, keep off Messerschmitts? Why not go after single Junkers?

When they came out of the command-post dug-out it was already growing light. The last stars were fading.

"Either we'll die with glory, or a miracle achieve!" sang Baiseitov.

"Shut up," said Rassokhin.

The six fighters were already lined up facing into the wind. In the melting darkness Lunin made out the mechanics fussing round them. Rassokhin led the way across the field, waddling clumsily. He was not built for movement on the ground. Baiseitov followed close on his heels, glancing round at the same regular intervals. The diminutive Kabankov moved faster than any of them, bouncing through the grass of the airfield like a steel ball. His second, Chepelkin, big and ponderous, could scarcely keep up with him. They passed Rassokhin and were the first to reach the aircraft. Lunin and Serov walked side by side.

"This is yours," said Serov.

The mechanic in charge of the aircraft stood at attention in front of Lunin and saluted.

"Everything shipshape, Comrade Major," he said. "We've put the tail skid straight and patched up six holes in her."

The carefully applied patches on the aircraft's wings and fuselage told the story of all Nikritin's battles, even the last, when, dying, he brought his plane back to the station. The bullet-scarred aircraft had lived longer than its master.

Lunin put on his helmet, got into the cockpit, fastened his safety belt and started the engine. He felt quite calm. He had been worried five minutes ago, when sleepy and shivering in the early-morning cold they had stood in the command-post dug-out and Rassokhin, outlined in the yellow glow of the oil-lamp, had told them that the Germans would be attacking the fleet that day, and that

the attack would be made from the south-west. Then there had been something alarming even in their own huge shadows on the walls. But the roar of the engine reassured Lunin at once. Lunin had been accustomed to that sound for many years and it had never failed to steady his nerves.

It was rapidly growing lighter and he could see the grass trembling in the wind of Rassokhin's propeller. Rassokhin's plane roared away across the clearing and took off; it was followed into the air by Baiseitov. They were already circling when Kabankov and Chepelkin left the ground. Time to go! Lunin took off and at once the sea rose up gleaming beyond the firs.

Glancing round, Lunin saw Serov's plane right behind him, already airborne. Rassokhin was heading towards the sea in a climb. They flew in a broad triangle—Rassokhin and Baiseitov in front, Kabankov and Chepelkin on the right, Lunin and Serov on the left. They crossed the shoreline. The water under them grew lighter, reflecting the lightening sky.

Leningrad lay to port, in the east; its huge mass, divided by the Neva, was scarcely visible—you could not look at it because of the rising sun. To starboard, on a long, flat, narrow island lay Kronstadt, all cranes and factory chimneys, with a cathedral like an Easter cake sticking up out of them. Ahead, on the wooded southern shore, gleamed the low white buildings of Peterhof and Oranienbaum. This slice of the Gulf of Finland, twenty miles broad, lying between Leningrad and Kronstadt, was known as Marquis Pool. It was the easternmost sleeve of the Baltic. The whole Baltic Sea, except for Marquis Pool, had been seized by the Germans and the Finns. In the southern half of the Pool, between Kronstadt and Peterhof, now lay the whole Soviet Baltic Fleet.

Lunin could see the ships well. They were stationary, but their turrets were moving. The ships were firing. Every gun was pointing either south or south-west.

But what was happening in that area it was impossible to make out. A huge greyish-violet cloud hung motionlessly over the whole southern shore. It had crept up to the shore-line and stopped dead, as if at some invisible barrier. It was hard to guess what was concealed underneath. Lunin could see only the beaches, but there was nothing of interest on the beaches, and the shells from the ships' artillery were bursting far away behind them.

Rassokhin led his squadron up to the cloud, then flew along it, to the east. Huge slow-moving billows of vapour pitted with deep caverns of purple and mother-of-pearl towered like a mountain range on Lunin's right. Rassokhin followed the edge of the cloud almost as far as the Port of Leningrad, then turned north again. They recrossed the Marquis Pool opposite the mouth of the Neva, and flew along the north shore towards the west. Near Lisy Nos, a long wooded spit of land jutting out into the sea in the direction of Kronstadt, they turned south again, and again headed straight for the cloud.

It towered up before them as they approached it, an impenetrable mountain wall, but quivering and alive, like primeval magma. And suddenly Lunin saw German aircraft coming out of it.

They tumbled out of the wreathing vapour in batches of eight, twelve, and fifteen, from all sides and at various heights.

At first there were only about twenty or thirty of them, long and black, and fairly slow, but they went on pouring out of the cloud, like wasps from a nest, one batch after another, and soon the whole sky from the south-east to the south-west was full of them. Taking up formation, they flew towards the fleet.

Lunin turned his head and saw Rassokhin's entire squadron—six small aircraft.

Gripping his stick, Lunin watched Rassokhin. What would he do now? He remembered Rassokhin's voice saying: "Don't go after single Junkers!" Well, he certainly

wouldn't go after a horde like this! How could he! Rassokhin was banking slightly and changing course. Now he would turn away steeply and take them back to the station.

But Rassokhin did not turn. He was tearing straight into the middle of this armada that had appeared out of the cloud.

And suddenly Lunin's surprise and anxiety gave way to an inexplicable feeling of exultation. He saw Baiseitov, Kabankov, and Chepelkin increase speed and race after Rassokhin. And he, too, gave his engine full throttle. He turned his head. Serov was still the same distance behind him. The six planes raced towards the bombers that were now swarming across the sky from horizon to horizon.

Lunin held his breath. The Junkers grew bigger as he watched them, their wings seemed to stretch. As the squadron roared over the eastern outskirts of Kronstadt, Lunin saw the ships below. The whole air, above, below, all round them, was full of sudden puffs of smoke. The Kronstadt ack-ack was putting up a barrage. Lunin suddenly realized that the Junkers were making for the ships, converging on them from all sides. The fighters must get there first. He kept his engine at full throttle, glancing over his starboard wing at Rassokhin's plane in front.

They met exactly over the ships.

One Junkers after another with huge spreading wings appeared in Lunin's sights, but vanished immediately, for everything was moving. Full of impatience, Lunin opened fire at once, although the nearest Junkers was still about 400 yards away. Long whiskers of flame glinting dully in the sun snaked in front of a Junkers. It had opened fire with tracers.

A second later there were Junkers everywhere—in front, behind, above, below. Lunin could see nothing but long black shapes. He tore into the midst of them. Streaks of flame crossed and twisted everywhere, encircling him like a net. Every second he had to change course to avoid collision. Whenever one of them came into his sights—as

they did all the time—he fired. But the black shapes vanished out of his sights so quickly, replaced by others, that he had no chance to see the results of his fire. He saw only that they were afraid of him and shied away like cows with a dog in the herd. This discovery gave him great pleasure and he swooped round them, hustling them together and driving them apart.

In the confusion, he had long ago forgotten that he ought to be following Rassokhin, and had lost sight of him and the rest of his comrades. But when suddenly, for no apparent reason, a Junkers began to swerve about, nearly colliding with another, he knew they were there. Glancing back he noticed Serov's plane right on his tail and wondered how Serov had managed to keep sight of him in such a scramble.

Far below him he saw the little toy-like ships, saw the sticks of bombs slanting down, saw the white blobs of explosions appearing in rows on the smooth surface of the sea. The Junkers were bombing but not hitting their targets, they were jettisoning their bombs before they got there. So that was what Rassokhin had meant when he said: "Stop them making their runs." There were only six Soviet planes, but they had done what they set out to do, and the bombs were falling into the water! And with a wild feeling of elation Lunin weaved about among startled Junkers, firing alomst continuously.

As soon as a Junkers had dropped its bombs, it turned and bolted for the cloud, regardless of formation. They seemed to want to get away from each other. All of them made for the cloud, but the cloud was not so near as it had been. During the battle its ridges, peaks, and towers had drifted south and the whole southern shore was now bathed in sunlight that played on the curling, billowing smoke of fires.

Suddenly the sky round Lunin was empty. He looked one way, then the other. There was not a single Junkers anywhere near. The change astonished him and at first he

could not grasp what it meant. His blood was up and he wanted to tear in pursuit of the Germans with all his guns firing. The Junkers he had seen were far away from him and from each other, and he kept changing course, not knowing which of them to choose for attack. They were all flying south at various heights, and he, too, had already crossed the coast. Glancing back, he saw Serov's plane behind him, repeating all his manœuvres.

Scanning the sky, Lunin suddenly caught sight of two Junkers flying wing-tip to wing-tip, about four hundred yards away from him. He screamed down on them, rejoicing as he watched the black shapes grow larger in his sights. Both Junkers opened fire on him, but he took no notice. He attacked the left one, coming in on the left and firing at that Junkers' left wing. He nearly rammed it, but at the last moment he pulled back the stick and flew over. As he went up in a steep climbing turn, he saw Serov send a burst into the same Junkers and also fly over it.

Thick black smoke streamed out of the left-hand Junkers. Its wing burning, it limped along on one engine. The right-hand Junkers was leaving it behind. They were both approaching the cloud, which now loomed quite near, blotting out half the sky with its battlemented towers.

Don't let him get away, Lunin thought, watching the burning Junkers. Another burst would finish him!

Turning round to see if Serov was still following him, he noticed Rassokhin's plane beyond Serov, far out to sea. Rassokhin was wobbling his wings. Lunin knew quite well what that meant. Rassokhin was calling his squadron together. But the chance was too good to miss. Wait a minute! I'll just give this Junkers another burst and catch you up.

He had to think quickly because the cloud was already looming over him. But the burning Junkers could not dodge, and came straight into his sights. Lunin decided to take no chances and did not press the trigger-button

until the range was down to a hundred yards. But there was no response. The guns did not fire.

It was uncanny, a nightmare. Till now the guns had worked perfectly. What had happened to them? Lunin zoomed over the burning Junkers and pulled round in a steep turn to get it back into his sights.

Whitish flecks of cloud were already grazing the Junkers when Lunin again pressed the trigger-button. No response! The guns had failed again. Lunin roared into the cloud at top speed and everything—Junkers, ground, sky, sea—disappeared at once.

Hell! For another few seconds, out of sheer obstinacy he tore on through the dense mist. He could not even see his own wings. Obviously it was out of the question to find the Junkers in this gigantic mass of vapour. Now all his attention was focussed on the guns. If the guns had not failed at the last moment, the Junkers would have been shot down. He pressed the button again. The guns were silent. And suddenly he understood. The guns were all right, he had simply run out of ammunition. He had fired too much and too indiscriminately during the battle.

Then he remembered Rassokhin. They must be nearly over the airfield by now. It was idiotic to continue the chase, he must go back at once. Flying by instruments, he made a turn and roared back northwards through the mist.

Suddenly there was silence.

It was dark and still, as if he had plunged to the bottom of the sea.

Why was it so quiet?

He realized that the engine had stopped.

He felt the plane losing height. He was going down and down through the silence, through the swirling vapour.

What had happened to the engine?

It must have been damaged by a bullet while he was chasing the Junkers.

Apparently the engine was not damaged very badly,

for it picked up again. Lunin flew northwards, gaining altitude. But only for a few seconds. The engine cut out again and Lunin again went down in a glide.

The same thing happened several times, the engine kept failing and coming to life again. At length it failed completely. Lunin headed northwards, to the sea, trying desperately not to lose height. The Germans had not got the coast yet. If only he knew where he was. But he wouldn't make it. The plane was losing height rapidly.

When at last Lunin came out of the cloud, he saw the sea ahead of him, six or eight miles away. But he was already down to 2,500 feet. There was a slight head wind and he had no hope of reaching the shore. Below him he saw forest with smoke creeping over it, catching in the prickly tops of the firs. Who was in this forest and what was happening there, he had no means of knowing.

He scanned the forest for some suitable landing ground, but there were no clearings about. The forest stretched everywhere. He saw a road winding through the forest, and a village dotted along the road. He would have made for the village and landed on the common or a cabbage field, if he had known there were no Germans there. If there were Germans, it would be better to land in a tree-top.

And suddenly he saw a lorry creeping along the road, full of soldiers. Red Army men! He felt a wave of relief. Dropping his nose, he steered confidently for the village.

The landing was exceptionally difficult. What he had taken for a common turned out to be a patch of felled timber, with tree-stumps all over it. He skimmed over the stumps and nearly landed in a cabbage field. But the field was too short. At the end of it there was a fence. The plane seemed to crawl over the fence, touched down in the dust of the road and slithered to a halt five paces from the nearest cottage.

He suddenly became conscious of the scents and sounds of the earth. There was a sickly smell of burning, the

forest that fringed the road was full of smoke. Invisible shells were screaming over the village. The scream always started somewhere in the north, by the sea, rose to a shriek as it passed overhead, and whined away to the south, until it was drowned in a shattering explosion. The Soviet long-range naval guns were shelling the advancing Germans.

Lunin jumped down from the cabin and ran to inspect the engine. He found the trouble at once; even in the air he had realized what had happened. On an aerodrome Lunin would have done a job like this in two minutes. But here he had nothing to do it with.

Turning round, he saw two boys, both of them barefooted and with the same fair hair, standing on the edge of the ditch, staring eagerly at the plane. One was about eleven, the other about five.

"Have you got a kopek?" Lunin asked the older boy.

"I've got a ruble," the boy answered and groping in his trousers' pocket offered Lunin a ruble note.

"No, I want a kopek," Lunin insisted.

The little one held out a few coins in his little palm. Lunin took a kopek and again started tinkering with the engine. The boys came closer and stood right behind him. Lunin heard their excited breathing.

"You haven't got a bodkin, have you?" Lunin asked the elder of the two.

"No."

"Perhaps somebody here has one. Run and ask in the village."

"There's nobody there. Everyone's gone away."

"Do you mean to say you're all alone?" Lunin said in surprise.

"With Granny."

"Why didn't you go away, too?"

"We went as far as Strelna and then the shells started bursting on the road. And Granny got frightened and we came back."

Strelna! Strelna was on the coast, just outside Leningrad. If the Germans broke through to Strelna, the whole south coast of the gulf would be cut off from Leningrad.

"I want a nail," he said. "A long, thin one. Find me a long nail."

They ran off to the village to look for a nail, and were away for a long time. Shells were still screaming over the village. Grasshoppers buzzed in the grass. High above him Lunin heard the hum of an engine. He looked up and saw a Messerschmitt circling overhead. A reconnaissance plane.

The boys returned. The elder was carrying about a dozen bent and rusty nails of various lengths. Lunin selected the longest.

"What's your name?" he asked the little one.

"Zyoza," the little boy replied.

"Zyoza?" Lunin repeated.

"That's what we call him. His name's Sergei," the elder boy explained.

Lunin continued his work. Time passed. The sun mounted higher and higher. The boys did not leave the plane for an instant. At last the engine spoke. Now he had to take off. But how?

The cabbage field was too small; there were tree-stumps in the clearing. The only place was the road. But in one direction the road wound through the forest, between high firs, and in the other it became a street, squeezed between two rows of cottages. Lunin paced out the width of the street. If he steered exactly down the middle, he could avoid the houses. But the trouble was that not far away there was a bend in the street and just where he must leave the ground a cottage stood across his path.

He walked towards the cottage, counting his paces and hoping his guess was wrong. The boys followed him, entranced by everything he did. No, he had not been wrong. It was quite impossible to get off the ground before the bend in the street. He turned back to the plane, not knowing what to do. The boys followed him.

The three of them were standing together by the plane, when they suddenly heard a loud approaching roar. Looking up, Lunin saw a Junkers skimming over the forest and bombs falling out of it.

"Down!" he shouted to the boys and slid into the ditch.

His plane was in full view and the Junkers was bombing it. The bombs burst one after the other. A stick of small bombs. Not more than fifty pounds each. The first landed quite a long way off, the second nearer. The third right close by, spattering Lunin with earth. The fourth farther away, on the other side of the road. The fifth even farther.

Lunin got up slowly, dazed and wiping his face with his hands. The plane was still standing there unharmed. Dry earth thrown up by the explosions was sprinkling off the branches of the trees.

And suddenly the elder boy ran away from him down the village street, shouting:

"Granny! They've killed Zyoza!"

At first Lunin took the prostrate figure of Zyoza for a little bundle of rags. Lunin bent over the boy and, without knowing why, lifted him. He was surprisingly light—just small, light bones. Not daring to touch the little fair head, Lunin bent down to see the face from the side. There was no face.

Clasping the dead boy to his chest, Lunin stood for a long time beside his plane and watched the elder boy running down the empty street, shouting and hopping queerly, until he disappeared round the bend.

Lunin jumped over the ditch and laid Zyoza on the moss under a fir-tree. Then he went back to the plane, got into the cabin and started the engine. He had made up his mind. At that moment he did not care whether he crashed into the wall of a cottage or not.

The nose of the plane hid everything in front. Lunin started at full throttle and roared forward. The tail came up and he saw the street and the cottage at the bend

rushing nearer. His wing-tips nearly touched the wooden porches on both sides. The plane raced down the very middle of the road, its wheels in the cart tracks. At a pot-hole it bounced into the air and crashed down again. The pot-hole acted as a spring-board and saved him. After hitting the ground, the plane bounced again, much higher this time, and roared over the cottage.

After the cottage it fell again, towards a fence and a heap of old boxes, nearly touched them, but straightened out and began to climb. Lunin pulled in his undercarriage and circled over the village.

The sea gleamed in the north, with ships on it. It was already full noon and the sun was in the south. Turning his back on the sun, he headed for the ships and the sea.

He flew over the water, watching the shadow of his plane skimming the waves. Then other shadows, very faint, caught his eye. He looked round. Right above him, in the brilliant sky, he saw two aircraft. He recognized them at once. German fighters, Messerschmitt-109s.

They were on the same course as he, about two thousand feet higher. Obviously they were going to attack him.

Now I'm in a fine mess, Lunin thought. Not a single round of ammunition. And hardly any petrol left!

He was so angry with himself that he was not afraid. A glorious exhibition he had made of himself! What the hell were they waiting for?

Then he noticed yet another aircraft. Soviet! A Soviet I-16 fighter, the same type that Lunin was flying. His heart thumped joyfully. In a few seconds the two planes were flying side by side and Lunin recognized the pilot. It was Serov, smiling under his goggles.

Where were the Messerschmitts? What would they do now? But there were no Messerschmitts. They had vanished, like vapour sucked up by the sun.

Lunin had no petrol left at all when he finally brought his plane in and landed it on the very edge of the airfield. As he climbed out of the cabin he felt dizzy with exhaus-

tion. Everything swam and danced before his eyes. The sun was shining, a bumble-bee was humming, blades of grass plucked gently at his boots, in the distance the dahlias flamed round the veranda of the mess bungalow. His mechanic and the lanky, round-shouldered Serov, who had landed in the proper place, were already running towards him. They were both smiling.

"Thanks," Lunin said to Serov. "If it hadn't been for you. . . ."

"Notice how careful they are?" Serov said, referring to the German airmen. "They only attack when there are more of them. As soon as two of us showed up, they went away. . . . I lost you in the cloud. Couldn't find you anywhere! Came back to the station and took off again. . . ."

He was plainly overjoyed to see Lunin. Lunin felt a tenderness towards him and let his hand rest lightly for a moment on his shoulder.

"What about Captain Rassokhin?" he asked.

"He was worried."

"Is he angry?"

"Angry with me. . . ."

"Why?"

"Because I left you."

"You didn't leave me! I left you. It was entirely my fault!" Lunin exclaimed heatedly. "Let's go and see him."

He turned in the direction of the command post to report to Rassokhin. He remembered how Rassokhin had signalled him in the air and how he in his mad excitement had chased after the two Junkers. Now he would stand before Rassokhin, as Baiseitov had done the day before, and Rassokhin would shout at him as he had shouted at Baiseitov. But Serov said it was not worth going to the command post. It was dinner-time and everyone was in the mess, Rassokhin too. And Lunin hurried to the mess.

"You're wounded!" Serov exclaimed suddenly, loping along beside him.

"No, I'm not," Lunin said.

"You've got blood on your flying suit!"

On his chest near the zip-fastener Lunin noticed a reddish-brown stain.

"I'm all right," he said.

It was the blood of the little boy he had carried in his arms. But he did not want to tell anyone about that.

Rassokhin, Kabankov, and Chepelkin were waiting for Lunin on the steps of the mess. They were smiling. Hilda, catching sight of him through the open door, clapped her hands and ran out on to the steps, smiling too. Lunin halted, taken aback by these smiles.

"Come in, come in, Major," said Rassokhin. "Let's have dinner."

Every wrinkle in his freckled face was smiling.

But Lunin hesitated.

"I didn't do everything right, it seems, Comrade Captain," he said.

"Everything," Rassokhin said.

"Everything?"

"Everything was wrong," Rassokhin said. "Come in."

Sitting at table in the mess was Division Commissar Uvarov. Recognizing him, Lunin felt even more confused. But Uvarov was also smiling.

"Congratulations on your first battle, Major," he said. "You've given us some excitement today."

"Comrade Commissar, I . . ." Lunin began.

"But as a matter of fact, I never doubted you would come out of it all right," Uvarov said. "Hungry? Hilda, *borshch* for the Major!"

The pilots were still excited from the battle, their eyes were bright. Addressing Uvarov, they discussed events and recounted details. Uvarov listened attentively in silence.

"How many were there today?" Chepelkin asked.

"Not so many, seventy-three," said Kabankov. "Yesterday there were more, a hundred and nineteen."

"Anyhow we got three of them," Chepelkin said.

That was news to Lunin. In the confusion of the battle he had not noticed a single plane shot down. It turned out that two Junkers had been shot down by Rassokhin and Baiseitov, and one by Kabankov and Chepelkin. They discussed the whole course of the battle and Lunin was surprised to discover that this battle in which he himself had taken part, and which had seemed to him a complete scramble, was to them something planned and clear-cut, divided into separate stages, with a beginning and an end, and that they could recount in detail everything that had happened.

What was more, each man had a clear idea of what had been happening at the other aerodromes round Leningrad. They kept mentioning the names of regiment and squadron commanders. They felt the pulse of the whole air force that was defending Leningrad and the fleet as a single entity. They understood the various tasks that confronted each individual group of airmen. Although during the battle they had seen only each other's aircraft, they had not for a moment felt alone or isolated. They were very anxious to know what other squadrons, what the infantry, and the men on the ships thought of the battle they had just fought.

"I spoke to fleet headquarters," Uvarov said suddenly. "Not a single bomb hit the ships today."

They all fell silent and turned towards him.

"That's the main thing!" Chepelkin said with triumph.

"The main thing is that the Germans are digging in," Uvarov continued.

"Digging in?" Chepelkin said in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that we've stopped them," Uvarov said. "They were counting on taking Leningrad and the fleet in one swoop, the whole lot at once."

"And it hasn't come off!" Kabankov exclaimed, raising his small hard fist.

"No, it hasn't," Uvarov affirmed.

"What will they do now?" Chepelkin asked.

"Now they will try to take the city by storm."

He said no more and went out with Rassokhin into the next room where the telephone was ringing.

A minute later Rassokhin returned.

"Scramble!" he said.

Again!

There was a clatter of chairs and the men rushed out of the mess, bumping into each other in the narrow passage. As he raced after Serov towards his plane, which was already in position for take-off, Lunin could see anti-aircraft shells bursting over Leningrad in the south-east, beyond the fir-trees.

CHAPTER THREE

The House on Vasilyevsky Island

1

When the strange woman with mud on her skirt told Sonya her mother was dead, Sonya decided at once that Grandad must not know. And if Grandad must not know, her brother Slava must not know, either. She entered the room with a set expression on her face to lay the table for dinner (that was her job) and even smiled

when Grandad came in from the kitchen and looked at her. But having arranged the plates and forks, she ran away into Mummy's room, where she had slept with Mummy for so many years, sat down at her little desk with the coloured cardboard theatre on it, and cried. She had to cry silently, and she tried not to breathe; whenever she breathed, a sound like a groan came from her mouth.

"Sonya, dinner!" Grandad called from the dining-room in his sharp, high-pitched voice. (It was his job to cook the dinner.)

She brushed away her tears and went out smiling. He was already sitting at table, his small head thrown back proudly, and suddenly he shot such a penetrating glance at her that for a second she thought he had guessed everything. He said nothing, however. In order to gain time and compose herself, she hurried to the open window and, leaning out, shouted down six storeys:

"Slava, come and have dinner!"

Since Mummy had gone away to dig trenches, the kitchen had been in Grandad's charge. He cooked for the three of them and never let Sonya near his saucepans, just as he had never let her near his books, maps, and manuscripts.

"I'm a traveller, and all travellers are cooks," he would say, standing by the stove in his professor's skull-cap, light-blue dressing-gown, and soft red slippers. "I've cooked for every expedition I've been on."

And the dishes he gave Sonya and Slava were special ones, of his own invention, so scientifically concocted that it was at times impossible to tell the potatoes from the meat, and the meat from the macaroni.

Sonya's grandfather, Ilya Yakovlevich Mednikov, was a professor of a very complicated science known as hydrology.

All his life he had studied lakes and rivers. He had ridden or tramped over the whole country, even the

remotest parts. At one time he used to go off with an expedition every spring and return only in autumn. But as he grew older the expeditions became too much for him; he began to travel less and gave all his time to work at his desk, systematizing the material he had collected and solving important theoretical problems. For the past five years he had been working on a monograph about Lake Ladoga, which was to be the chief work of his life.

Katerina Ilyinichna was his only daughter. For long a widower, he did not like leaving her, and at one time even used to take her with him on his expeditions. Seventeen years ago, when she married, Katerina Ilyinichna had not dared to leave her father, and had brought her husband to live in her father's flat. Her husband, Vsevolod Andreyevich Bystrov, was also a man of learning, but his subject was quite different from his father-in-law's—he was a student of philology. Since the outbreak of war he had been at the front, not near Leningrad, however, but somewhere far away, in the Ukraine. He wrote letters and from these letters Sonya had learned that he was doing some special work in the army for which a knowledge of languages was very important. Sonya wrote to him fairly often. She had made up her mind at once that she would surely write to him about what had happened to Mummy. Not now, a little later on, but she would write. For some reason she felt she had no right to hide things from him. But Grandad mustn't know anything.

Grandad's love for Sonya's mother was jealous to the point of obsession. Before the war, if he came back from the institute and she was not at home, he would wait for her with intense anxiety and at the slightest rustle on the stairs patter to the door in his slippers. He had always been jealous of her husband and his relations with Vsevolod Andreyevich were rather cool. But when at the beginning of August his daughter suddenly went away for ten days to dig trenches, he bore the parting bravely and showed no sign of anxiety. Ten days passed, then another

ten days, and yet another. Ilya Yakovlevich said nothing and waited. In the meantime the institute where he worked had been evacuated with all its staff and equipment. The school where Katerina Ilyinichna worked had also been evacuated. Ilya Yakovlevich said nothing and waited. But every day his little cock-sparrow head was tilted back at a prouder angle and his voice grew sharper. And Sonya knew what that meant.

He used to toss his head like that and shout in the same harsh voice when he spoke of his scientific opponents. He had always had scientific opponents, in his own country and abroad. Abroad, in Germany and America, the experts disputed every new work he produced. And at table when he made his contemptuous, cutting, haughty remarks about his opponents, he would always toss his proud head with its blue-grey moustache and the dark eyes that Sonya had inherited, and his voice would rise to that same sharp, penetrating note. This tossing of his head was a challenge to fate, a declaration of defiance.

When Sonya was little and people asked her, "Who do you belong to?" she would answer, "Grandad." And for a long time she had been called "Grandad's little girl." To Grandad, with his severe, haughty, unbending ways, she was more attached than to her father. For a long time she had believed that Grandad had seen everything in the world, and that there was nothing he did not know or could not do.

Now, at sixteen, Sonya was taller than Grandad. As if for the first time, she saw how small, thin and old he was. Since Mummy had gone away to the defence works, he had grown even thinner. His face had become more pointed, his hooked nose bigger, his eyes large and sunken, his neck wasted and haggard. The day after Sonya heard that her mother had been killed, she had met him coming upstairs. He was returning from the library where he still spent several hours every day and there were heavy books under his arm. Exhausted, wearing his old faded overcoat

that was far too big for him, tapping his way uncertainly up the stairs with his umbrella, he looked so small and frail that she wanted to pick him up and carry him. Noticing her, he tossed his head cheerfully and stumped along quicker, trying to step as firmly as he could. But she could no longer be deceived. Now she knew that she was his senior, that Grandad and Slava were dependent on her, and that it was her duty to look after them.

It had all happened so unexpectedly. Only a short while ago she had been a little girl with a father, a mother, a grandfather who were strong, clever people, who lived in the real world that all grown-ups lived in, who stood between her and that world and let her play, and dream, and go to school. She had never been interested in war and despised Slava for his love of tanks and aeroplanes. She had never thought there could be a real war and she had not known what it was.

And all at once everything had changed. Mummy, Mummy! . . . Sonya woke up in the middle of the night, disturbed by a noise. She raised her head from her pillow, trying to guess what had wakened her. Was it a raid? No. The night was quiet, in the dense autumn darkness that surrounded her she could hear nothing. Yet she was sure it was a noise that had wakened her. What was it?

She lay on her little divan, next to Mummy's bed. The pillows on Mummy's bed gleamed a hazy white. They had always looked white like that when Sonya woke up at night. Sonya had been able to stretch out her hand and touch Mummy. But now Mummy was not there. And she would never be there any more. Sonya was alone in the huge night, full of cold and fear.

The enemies who had killed Mummy had surrounded the city, they were quite near, just beyond the roofs that loomed faintly in the darkness outside the window. What was Sonya to do? Sonya must go to the front. She had thought of that many times already. She was sixteen,

she was a big girl, taller than Grandad. She wouldn't be frightened, not more frightened than here; she would have other people with her at the front. In *Leningradskaya Pravda* she had read an article about a girl who had become a sniper. Couldn't she go to the front and become a sniper! Or if not a sniper, anything, as long as she got to the front and did something useful. Mummy had only been digging trenches and they had killed her.... Sonya could not go to sleep, her eyes were wide open in the darkness. The unbroken stillness of the night enveloped her.

And suddenly in this stillness she again heard the noise that had wakened her. Yes, that was it. It came to her from the dark depths of the flat and stopped. Sonya sat up listening. She tried to guess what it was. A human voice? Could a human voice sound like that! And suddenly the noise came again.

Sonya ran barefooted to the door. Her long white nightdress gleamed for a second in the dark glass of the mirror. She went out into the dining-room and stopped.

Slava slept in the dining-room. He had been sleeping there for a long time. Every evening a camp-bed was made up for him by the sideboard. A faint light from the night sky fell on his face through the window. He was lying on his back, breathing gently. His round placid face with parted lips looked quite babyish in sleep. Sonya reflected that tomorrow night she would make him sleep in Mummy's room, next to her. She stood by the table, listening. She was beginning to feel cold and was about to go back to bed, when she heard the noise again.

It was a sob, loud and choking, and so full of anguish that it made her heart stop beating, and it came from Grandad's room. It grew very loud, then stopped, as if the person who was crying had suddenly buried his head in the pillow. All was quiet, but Sonya was already running down the passage. She had never heard a grown man crying. Had someone told him about Mummy? Or had he guessed?

"Grandad!"

Not a sound came from his room. She stopped outside the door. Then she heard his voice, the same as usual, just a little hoarse.

"I was coughing. Go along to bed."

"Grandad, Mummy will come back! Honestly, I know she will. . . ."

"Go to bed!" he repeated furiously.

"Try and sleep, Grandad. . . ."

She wandered back down the passage. In the dining-room she stopped again at Slava's bed. How could she go away to the front? Who would look after them?

2

By the time the Germans began their assault on Leningrad, the city in its ring of anti-tank ditches was already a fortress. And every house in the city was a fortress.

The block of flats where Sonya lived had also become a fortress.

At that time an important event happened in Sonya's life—she fell in love. It was with a woman of thirty-eight, a woman of average height, simply dressed, with a very ordinary face which to Sonya, however, seemed unbelievably attractive. Her name was Antonina Trofimovna, and it was she who had done more than anybody to make their block into a fortress.

Sonya had seen her in the yard before the war. Antonina Trofimovna smoked long thin cigarettes. She wore an old and rather shabby jacket that looked somehow very smart on her; her walk was light and springy, and she had a soft, melodious voice.

Sonya had first heard this voice at the beginning of August, in the yard, when a little boy, a friend of Slava's, threw an old potato at Antonina Trofimovna. The potato brushed her skirt and smashed on the ground. The little

boy ran away and when Antonina Trofimovna turned round she saw only Slava. She looked at him keenly with a gleam of amusement in her eyes, knitted her fair eyebrows severely, and said: "What's the idea, laddie?"

Slava said nothing and grinned rather stupidly. When Antonina Trofimovna vanished through the gate Sonya hissed at him: "Little hooligan!"

"It wasn't me," Slava said.

An old woman who had seen and heard everything from an open window on the ground floor asked a charwoman who was crossing the yard about Antonina Trofimovna:

"Who was that?"

"Lives in number sixteen."

"Is she married?"

"Her husband's at the front."

"And children?"

"Sent the children away. Living by herself."

"Does she work?"

"Used to. At a spinning mill."

"But all the spinners have been evacuated," said the old woman.

"She stayed behind."

"Whatever for?"

"Don't ask me," the charwoman replied contemptuously.

But a month later that old woman and the charwoman and all the other women in the block listened to Antonina Trofimovna's voice with respect. No one had appointed her or elected her, she had simply started to give orders, and everyone gladly carried them out because they were all badly in need of someone to give orders.

She began with the air-raid shelter. There had been an air-raid shelter for the block before, but it was small, dark and damp, and during the first raid it was so crowded that people could only stand. Antonina Trofimovna announced that this air-raid shelter must be enlarged, because their block was the only big block of flats in the

whole locality and there was enough room underneath it to shelter nearly two thousand people. Sonya took part in the first expedition through the cellars, led by Antonina Trofimovna herself. Sonya had never suspected that such a huge, deep, dark, and mysterious kingdom existed under their house. It was an endless maze of vaulted passages criss-crossed with slimy pipes and scattered with innumerable stagnant pools of foul-smelling water that had never seen the light and seemed bottomlessly deep. With a wax taper raised in her hand Antonina Trofimovna stepped lightly across the slippery boards that spanned their black depths, and twenty women followed timidly behind her, hushed and overawed by the shadowy hugeness of the cellar. The only man among them, Abram the janitor, a tall aged Tatar with a solemn, melancholy face, knew the place well, but Antonina Trofimovna needed no guide; she led them all herself, although she had never been there before. When she slipped and put her foot in the water, she calmly took off her shoe, poured the water out of it, put it on again and walked on, still talking about the kind of shelter they would make here.

"Here we'll put up some bunks," she said. "We'll make mattresses for them, so that people can get a good night's rest and go off fresh in the morning to work. Most of the people in this district are workers and you know as well as I do what the workers are doing these days.... We'll put in electricity, board over the floor, pump the water out, bring in stoves and dry the walls. We'll have a loudspeaker, so that everyone can hear the all-clear...."

It was hard to believe her plan could be carried out—the cellar was too huge, too dark and damp—but no one raised any objection, not a word was spoken. And when she said: "Abram, we've got a pump, haven't we? Fix it up in the yard..." or: "We'll bring the mattresses from our own flats. I expect you've all got a spare mattress of some kind lying about somewhere, my dears," there was not a word of protest.

That very day two pumps started working and there were so many volunteers to pump that they both creaked incessantly for two days and brought up an ocean of water. Sonya did some pumping too, but she could not do as much as she would have liked, because she was pushed away from the pump by others who wanted to have a try. The little boys were particularly fanatical about it. They would stand in the yard for hours waiting for a chance to do five minutes' pumping. The boy who had thrown the potato at Antonina Trofimovna now gazed at her pleadingly, hoping to be allowed to pump. Antonina Trofimovna was in charge of the queue.

The electricity and loudspeakers were put in by fifteen-year-olds, who turned out to be highly skilled electricians. The floor was boarded, the bunks were built, the stoves were brought in—everything was done as Antonina Trofimovna had foretold.

"She's a Party woman," the charwoman would now say significantly, when Antonina Trofimovna walked across the yard.

Under Antonina Trofimovna's guidance tables for dominoes, draughts, and chess were provided, and a board was put up on which every day a fresh copy of *Leningradskaya Pravda* appeared. And the first evening there was an air-raid the whole local population did indeed gather there. The walls were chilly, but the iron stoves gave off a good heat. Mothers and children made themselves comfortable on the bunks, and the youngsters were round the tables all the time. In the shelter the roar of anti-aircraft guns was muffled and that alone was a comfort. Everyone could feel the big, six-storey block of flats above them and they relied on its protection. When a bomb fell there was not even a tremble in the cellar. The alert lasted all night and the all-clear did not come until five in the morning, but even then many people who had got warm and gone to sleep stayed in the shelter.

Since then the shelter had become the most crowded

place in the whole district. It was thronged with people even in quiet periods. There were particularly many people in the corner where Antonina Trofimovna had set up her headquarters. Under the light of a hundred-watt electric lamp she sat at her desk with a telephone in front of her and placards all round, arranging duties and giving instructions. She had an enormous amount of work and responsibility on her shoulders; the making-up of a duty roster entailed endless discussion and coordination, for they kept watch nearly all round the clock, on the roof, at the gates, and on every staircase. The black-out arrangements in such a big and crowded house also demanded quite a lot of attention.

"Run over to number four staircase, dear. They've got a light showing on the third floor."

"Did you know you're giving our house away to the Germans, dear? The black-out in your third window has come right unstuck."

"Abram, run over to number eleven and break the door open. It's getting dark and they've all gone away without putting the light out or covering the windows."

And what a lot of trouble there was with moving people from bombed houses into the empty flats of people who had been evacuated in the summer. It was a complex worrying job, because accommodation had to be found for the homeless, and the flats that belonged to servicemen had to be kept vacant at all costs, and the property the evacuees had left behind had to be looked after. Antonina Trofimovna went to a lot of trouble over the evacuees and their property, but it seemed she had a greater affection for those who had stayed.

"We are at the front," she would often say significantly, and the women listening to her would feel proud of themselves for staying—even those who had only stayed because they had not managed to get away in time.

Sonya would sit in the cellar and gaze at Antonina Trofimovna with adoring eyes, longing and hoping that

Antonina Trofimovna would give her the next assignment. She was too shy to speak up and ask, and the jobs she got were of the most trivial kind, to run somewhere, to go and tell someone something. But she would dash off to fulfil them with unusual zeal and at last Antonina Trofimovna noticed her. This happened quite by chance. Antonina Trofimovna went to check the boxes of sand that were kept in the loft and on every staircase, and she took Sonya with her.

These boxes of sand were kept for putting out incendiary bombs. At first everyone had regarded them as military objects and, as such, rather mysterious and to be treated with respect. But gradually people got used to these boxes and began to throw all kinds of rubbish into them. That was disorganization, and Antonina Trofimovna had decided to investigate the matter.

"Are you Professor Mednikov's grand-daughter?" she asked Sonya suddenly, as they climbed to the top of the house for the fourth time.

"Yes," Sonya replied, flattered at the unmistakable note of respect in Antonina Trofimovna's voice.

"Why doesn't your grandfather ever come down into the shelter? You live on the fifth floor, don't you?"

"He's not afraid. He always says he'll go down next time but he's sure the Germans will miss him this time."

"That's wrong," Antonina Trofimovna said.

Sonya was silent.

"What form are you in at school, dear?" Antonina Trofimovna asked when they had reached the next landing.

"I have just gone into the ninth," Sonya said, even more flattered by such attention. "But our school's been evacuated. . . ."

"Are you in the Pioneers?"

"I was accepted for the Komsomol last winter. . . ."

Antonina Trofimovna led the way lightly up the stairs without turning round and Sonya followed respectfully behind her.

"Soon I'll be introducing you to my Komsomol girls," said Antonina Trofimovna. "I've got some fine girls with me here."

After that conversation Sonya became a member of Antonina Trofimovna's closest entourage and was constantly sent out on all kinds of errands. She got to know every staircase, every flat, every corner of the house; she knew the loft as well as she knew the cellar, and she was on the roof as often as in the yard.

At first Sonya felt very uncomfortable on the roof. The iron sheeting made such a terrible rumbling at every step, her feet slipped down the slope, the six-storey precipice at the edge seemed to draw her like a magnet, a strong blustering wind from the Gulf tried to blow her over, her heavy respirator dragged her down. (Sonya had been presented with this respirator by Antonina Trofimovna, who herself never went anywhere now without one; it was very awkward to carry, but Sonya liked it because it gave her a military appearance.) Sonya was particularly frightened when Slava got on the roof with her. She was frightened because he experienced no fear whatever. He ran about the roof like a lunatic and purposely made the sheeting rumble to frighten Sonya. He would go to the very edge of the roof and peep over into the yard, and would even sit down on the edge with his knees round a drain-pipe and his legs dangling below. Sonya would scream with horror and he would purposely lift his arms to show he was not holding on.

But with time Sonya's fear of height passed off and she could scarcely understand why she had been frightened before. The roof now seemed just as safe a place as the yard and she grew to like being there because there was so much to see.

Clouds rolled over the roof and below them the besieged city spread its huge criss-cross pattern of streets and rivers. Sonya enjoyed picking out the places and buildings she knew. There was a tram crawling over the

wooden Birzhevoi Bridge, and on the other side of the bridge were the huge buildings of the Petrograd Side, the switchback in the pleasure ground, and the now sparsely leafed branches of the trees in the Zoo. Down below, over there, was the roof of the University, beyond it a stretch of the Neva was visible, and there, on the other side, were the Admiralty and St. Isaac's, and far beyond them the low round dome of the Kazan Cathedral. And farther away on all sides, roofs, roofs, roofs fading into the distance. And farther away still, on all sides, the invisible enemy, besieging the city.

Now, as soon as the alert was sounded, Sonya would run not into the shelter but up to the roof. Fire-watching on the roof during an alert was the most dangerous and therefore the most honourable duty, and it was performed by a group of daring spirits, hand-picked by Antonina Trofimovna. Their job was to extinguish any incendiary bombs that the Germans might drop on the roof. The Germans frequently dropped incendiary bombs in various parts of the city and endless stories were told of how these bombs had been extinguished. Slava, of course, did not hide the fact that he was waiting impatiently for a basket of bombs to be dropped on their roof—he was so anxious to put them out. But the Germans never dropped any incendiaries on the flats where Sonya lived.

From the roof you could see everything. The arrival of German aircraft was announced by the anti-aircraft guns; their shell-bursts would always be seen first, then the bombers would appear. You could watch their black shapes flying in formation, appearing and disappearing among the clouds, and the anti-aircraft fire breaking up their formation. Whatever you said about them, the anti-aircraft guns were a real nuisance to the Germans! The bombers would spread out in various directions, and more and more batteries would open up all over the city. When a bomber flew right over the house, your heart would stop beating and your head would duck down of its own accord.

You had to climb in the attic window because splinters from the shells bursting overhead would scatter down on the roof like rain. There was no need to hurry though, because they did not fall very quickly and reached the roof a long time afterwards, when the bomber was far away from the house. Then you could climb out on the roof again and watch the planes diving and try to guess what they were aiming at: the Petrograd Side or the Baltic Station, the port or the harbour, the factories or the ships on the Neva. When a bomb burst, Sonya could feel the whole great bulk of the house shudder, and she would throw herself flat to avoid being swept off the roof by the blast. More than once she had seen a plane hit by anti-aircraft fire and watched it spin down in flames. Then she would jump for joy and shout and run down to the shelter—to tell everyone all about it.

At night, too, Sonya was often on the roof. The city below was hidden in darkness, quiet and mysterious, but the sky blazed with light. The bluish beams of search-lights darted about the sky and crossed like swords, and the stars beyond them faded and changed colour. The enemy ring enclosing the city was now plainly visible—the glow of it was reflected in the sky.

The assault on Leningrad continued. The ceaseless boom of firing reached the centre of the city, like the boom of the ocean. It seemed as if somewhere out there, beyond the darkened houses, gigantic waves were pounding incessantly at the foot of gigantic cliffs. Like all the inhabitants of the city, Sonya had long ago learned to distinguish the sound of gun-fire from that of shell-bursts, the sound of Soviet artillery from that of the enemy.

At night the mighty voice of the big guns on the ships was particularly clear; it seemed to shake the whole city. In the rare moments when the artillery was silent the wind brought the clatter of machine-guns.

CHAPTER FOUR

Autumn

1

Throughout the first weeks of September the Germans, having captured Gàtchina, strove to break through to the sea, to the south shore of the Marquis Pool, and at last they did break through to the narrow strip of coast between Peterhof and the south-western outskirts of Leningrad. At no point yet had they come so close to the be-

sieged city as this. After capturing Strelna and Ligovo, which had long ago become suburbs of the city, they were halted at the brick walls of the Leningrad typewriter factory, beyond which the city itself began. And nowhere was the position of the German forces so precarious as here, for they had gained only a narrow wedge of coast, and Oranienbaum, which lay to the west of Peterhof, was still in Soviet hands. And west of Oranienbaum, there was also a strip of coast about ten miles broad, including the villages of Big and Little Izhora, Lebyazhye, and Gora-Valdai, still not captured by the Germans, who had been unable to advance in face of the powerful artillery fire of the Kronstadt south forts. Thus at this point the so-called "Leningrad ring" now consisted of two "rings," between which communication by land was impossible; the first "ring" enclosed Leningrad and the narrowest part of the Karelian Isthmus adjoining it; the second "ring" consisted of this strip of the south coast of the Gulf of Finland from Oranienbaum to the mouth of the River Voronka, which flowed into the Gulf from the south. All through September the Germans who had wedged themselves between these two "rings" pressed forward into the streets of the city with the support of the powerful artillery, tank and air forces which they had concentrated in that area.

Every day, and sometimes several times a day, the Germans sent armadas of bombers to attack the city and the fleet. They were met by small formations of Soviet fighters based on airfields round the city and even in the city itself. Some of them were army planes from the Leningrad front, others were naval planes from the Baltic Fleet, but at that time both groups came under a single command and fought according to a unified plan, in close cooperation with each other. In the face of the enemy's numerical superiority in the air constant cooperation was essential.

One of these formations was the squadron commanded by Captain Rassokhin. The squadron went up five, six,

even seven times a day. It engaged the enemy, no matter how great their numbers.

In the intervals between the attacks of the air armadas the German air force was constantly active on a smaller scale. Now a reconnaissance plane, distinguishable only by its white vapour trail, would appear at an enormous height above Kronstadt; now an artillery spotter would creep low over the front line, directing the fire of the enemy guns; now a lone bomber would sneak through the clouds in an attempt to reach some important target; now a force of German fighters would fly over in the hope of tempting Rassokhin's sextet into battle and destroying it. The six aircraft could not stay in the air indefinitely, so on days that were comparatively quiet they patrolled in pairs. A little shelter of fir branches was erected near the runway and there they waited their turn to fly. Lunin always flew with Serov.

On September 10 Lunin made his first "kill." Serov and he had cut across the Gulf and reached the coast near Peterhof. Beyond Peterhof everything was burning and nothing could be seen through the smoke that hung almost motionless in the damp windless air. As they flew along this strip of smoke, they spotted in the distance a two-seater German fighter of the Messerschmitt-110 type. It was stooging about the front, disappearing and reappearing in the smoke. In order to catch the German unawares, Lunin also dived into the smoke. He could see nothing but the purple glow of fires below and the hazy purple blob of the sun overhead. He could not even see Serov, but he knew he was following him. Suddenly they came out of the smoke and saw the German plane quite close. It was banking right in front of them.

Lunin gave a short burst and darted past, because the Germans had seen him a fraction of a second earlier and had already opened fire. The Messerschmitt-110 had a crew of two and it was very difficult to attack because of its simultaneous firing power in front and rear. As he

banked, Lunin saw Serov give a burst and the rear gun of the Messerschmitt stop firing. Probably the gunner-wireless-operator in the rear turret had been killed.

Then Lunin came in on the German's tail. Now he must fire at him, fire until he got him. The Messerschmitt plunged into the smoke, but Lunin, firing all the time, stuck so close to its tail that he did not lose it even in the smoke. When they came out of the smoke, Lunin saw tanks below. They were grey with black crosses on them. I'll give them something to look at, Lunin thought. I'll bring him down right in front of their noses. Hugging the German's tail, Lunin went on firing and repeating all his manœuvres.

The German plane lurched downwards and went into a spin. It hit the ground about two hundred yards from the clearing where the German tanks were standing and at once turned into a black column of smoke.

Bullets were coming up at Lunin from the ground. But before flying away, he circled round the burning aircraft. It was quite unnecessary and he never did such a thing again.

The following day was dry, but dull and overcast. The clouds hung strangely, in several layers. Each layer was a different colour and moved at a different speed. The spaces between them, full of diffused light, were arranged one on top of the other, like shelves. On these "shelves," concealed from above and below, dozens of bombers could get through to their targets. Lunin and Serov climbed and dived through layer after layer of cloud inspecting each intervening "shelf."

There were clouds above and below them. When they broke through one layer, there were still clouds above and below. They climbed through another layer, but it was still the same. Now there could be only one more layer above them, because they could feel the sun; it was like being in a huge underwater grotto illuminated by the sun's rays. And in this grotto, right in front of them,

they saw a lone Junkers. Its huge diffused shadow fell on the lower layer of clouds.

Lunin and Serov opened fire simultaneously. The Junkers dived at once into the wreathing vapour and vanished. They dived, too, and came out on the lower "shelf" before the Junkers. The Junkers flew out of the clouds straight on to their guns. But there was only time for one short burst. The Junkers climbed again and disappeared. They roared after it, but this time they were too slow. They caught a glimpse of it disappearing into the top layer of cloud. When they broke through this last layer, they saw the sun shining in a clear sky above an endless undulating plain of clouds.

The Junkers opened fire on them immediately but they had the sun behind them and the Germans were dazzled. Lunin and Serov fired several bursts at point-blank range and the Junkers' starboard propeller stopped turning. Again it disappeared into the clouds.

Now they had no difficulty in overtaking the crippled enemy. It dived through one layer after another and on each "shelf" their guns were waiting for it. It was on fire, but the port propeller was still turning.

At last they pierced the lowest layer of cloud and saw water below them. The Junkers was not there. Lunin made a circle in order to get a better view and suddenly he noticed a splash in the water. The sea closed over the Junkers and it was gone.

The shooting down of those two German planes gave Lunin something that he had previously lacked—a sense of equality with the others. He no longer felt himself a novice. He had spent only a fortnight in the squadron, but in that time so much had happened that he felt as if he had been there several months. They had all got used to him, and they, too, felt he had been in the squadron as long as any of them.

On one occasion they were nearly destroyed, all six of them at once.

The station had been informed by observer posts that an armada of Junkers was coming up from the south towards the sea. Rassokhin took his whole squadron into the air. The Junkers turned out to be very far away and there were not more than ten of them. As soon as they spotted Rassokhin's squadron they turned south and disappeared. Rassokhin was already leading the squadron back across the sea towards the station, when suddenly he noticed high above him twenty German fighters, Messerschmitt-109s.

The stumpy, snub-nosed I-16, with its air-cooled engine, was more manœuvrable than the Messerschmitt, but the Messerschmitt had a greater turn of speed. This advantage of speed enabled the Messerschmitts to pick a fight when they wanted it. Now there were twenty of them against six and they did want it.

Rassokhin formed his squadron in a circle. To Lunin it seemed a reasonable move. They would all be guarding each other's tails and could not be attacked from the rear. Serov was guarding Lunin, Lunin Chepelkin, Chepelkin Kabankov, Kabankov Baiseitov, Baiseitov Rassokhin, Rassokhin Serov. They flew round and round in a circle, trying to keep the distance between them the same.

The German fighters also formed into a circle, a much bigger one, revolving in the opposite direction; Rassokhin's squadron was inside it. They flew round and round, like two roundabouts, one inside the other. Lunin could not understand what the Germans were trying to do and it worried him. The German fighters hurtled past like the carriages of an express train, and he began to count them. Eighteen. There had been twenty before. Where were the other two?

He looked up and there were the two Messerschmitts circling high above the roundabout. And suddenly they screamed down on top of Kabankov and Chepelkin. Kabankov and Chepelkin saw them coming and pulled up the noses of their planes to fire at the Germans; Baiseitov's

tail was left unprotected. At once four German fighters broke away from the big circle and attacked Baiseitov from behind. All the others swooped on Chepelkin and Kabankov.

Lunin saw Baiseitov turn round in his cockpit and look back at the blazing guns of his attackers. He could have tried to shake off the Messerschmitts and return their fire. But that meant leaving Rassokhin's tail unguarded. And Baiseitov stuck to Rassokhin, condemning himself to be shot.

Lunin was on the other side of the circle and moving in the opposite direction. He banked steeply and came in on the flank of the Messerschmitts attacking Baiseitov. The Germans broke away for a second and he was able to get on Baiseitov's tail and close the circle again.

But now the circle was smaller than before. There were only four planes in it—Rassokhin, Baiseitov, Lunin, and Serov. Lunin had lost sight of Chepelkin and Kabankov. He looked round for them. Surely they hadn't been shot down? But then he saw them quite close by; they were circling behind each other, guarding each other's tails. The Messerschmitts were diving on them from all sides, snapping at them like fish after a piece of surface bait. But they kept turning, nearer and nearer, and suddenly Kabankov dived under the Messerschmitts and came up behind Lunin. Chepelkin did exactly the same. Lunin turned aside and let them in. The circle was restored.

The Germans also formed into a circle and again the two roundabouts went spinning on, one inside the other. Just the same as before. How would it end? Lunin glanced at his fuel gauge. There was enough fuel left for about twenty minutes. And what then? But would they last out twenty minutes? The eighteen Messerschmitts were still circling round them. And where were the other two? He saw them high above, glinting in the sun. In a moment they would dive.

This time they chose Lunin and Serov. Lunin took the attack without wavering. Whatever happened, the circle must not be broken. Bullets slashed through his wings, the plane shuddered and swayed. Lunin glanced back and saw Serov. Serov was still behind him. The circle was unbroken. But far below the two Messerschmitts had come out of their dive and were climbing again. In two minutes they would dive again. Eventually they must shoot someone down and destroy the circle; then it would be all over.

Earth and water revolved below him—Kronstadt, Peterhof, the huge crane on the North Wharf at the mouth of the Neva, Lisy Nos. They came round again, Kronstadt, Peterhof, the crane, Lisy Nos. Enough fuel left for fifteen minutes. The two German fighters started their dive.

This time they struck at Baiseitov. Baiseitov, who was guarding Rassokhin's tail, did not flinch. His plane seemed to be damaged, because it suddenly lurched downwards, but Baiseitov kept control and regained his place behind Rassokhin. The two Messerschmitts flattened out to climb and make a fresh attack. The two circles, one inside the other, whirled round steadily, like the wheels of a machine. Round again and again, again and again. Enough fuel for twelve minutes. Then it would be all over, if not before. And there was no way out. Surely there must be a way out?

And suddenly the Messerschmitts disappeared. The whole twenty turned southwards and vanished into the sunny blue. Unable to believe or understand what had happened, not knowing where he would be attacked from next, Lunin went on flying behind Chepelkin.

Then he saw eight Soviet fighters. In four pairs they were flying to the aid of Rassokhin's squadron from the east.

They were their neighbours, front-line planes. They had been sent to help them. The Germans had seen them coming and made off.

When Lunin climbed out of his plane on the airfield, the fir-trees went on spinning before his eyes. He could not believe he and his comrades were still alive.

They all seemed to have the same feeling. No one spoke as they walked unsteadily across the grass of the airfield. Chepelkin and Baiseitov had grey, haggard faces. Rassokhin's little eyes gleamed dully under his ginger eyebrows.

"Fine!" Chepelkin said in an uncertain voice.

"What's fine?" Rassokhin snapped furiously. "That the Germans can't shoot straight? Or that we got help? What right had we to rely on help? If they had come two minutes later, there would have been none of us left! . . ."

Chepelkin stood red-faced in front of Rassokhin, staring at the ground and wondering whether Rassokhin was angry with him or with somebody else.

"There's no escape from a circle like that," Rassokhin said. Plainly he was angry with himself. "There's only one sure defence and that's attack, shoot them down!"

No one ever mentioned that terrible roundabout again, but Lunin felt it had brought them closer together. And apart from that a surprising intimacy had grown up between them without any talk or self-revelation. It was simply that they all had to save each other so many times. In order to have the moral strength that was needed for fighting, they had to trust each other more than themselves, and to gain another man's trust you had to love him. And they trusted each other. Every battle strengthened that trust, and they loved each other with a clear, simple, open-hearted love. And Rassokhin could without any fear admit to them all that by forming them in a circle he had made a mistake which might easily have caused their destruction; for they loved and trusted him, although he frequently let them feel the sharp edge of his tongue.

Lunin always flew with Serov and the bond of mutual reliance linked them together even more firmly than they

were linked with the others. Just before sunset on the day of the roundabout Serov saved Lunin again. They were flying home over the sea. A mist had risen and visibility was poor because the huge purple sun sinking into the water infused the mist with a blinding purple glow. In this glittering haze Lunin was suddenly attacked by a Messerschmitt-109. Luckily Lunin saw it when it was still about five hundred yards away, and got his nose round in time.

They flew straight at each other, firing into each other's guns.

You'll turn before I do, Lunin thought. But the German did not want to turn, either. They seemed on the point of colliding. But at the last moment the German gave in and pulled his stick back. He screamed over Lunin, nearly grazing him with the belly of his plane. Satisfied with his tenacity, Lunin was still flying straight when he noticed a stream of bullets coming past him from behind. The Messerschmitt, after hopping over him, had done a roll and come down on his tail. Now it was firing at him from the rear, and however much Lunin dodged and weaved, it stuck to him and fired all the time. Lunin would almost certainly have been shot down, had not Serov come in behind the Messerschmitt. The German had not noticed Serov in the glittering haze, and Serov killed him; like a scraggy black bird the Messerschmitt slithered over the great disc of the sun and plunged into the flame-purple water.

Two days later Lunin saved Serov. The pair of them were out alone again and two Messerschmitts attacked them over the sea. This time they split up: Lunin fought with one, Serov with the other. Lunin had a long tussle with his Messerschmitt. They kept trying to get on each other's tails, rolling, diving, attacking from all angles. Lunin never knew whether he succeeded in damaging the plane or wounding the pilot, but suddenly the German retired from the fight and made off. Lunin looked round in

search of Serov. The sky was deserted. For miles round there was not a sign of an aircraft.

What if Serov had been shot down? Sick with anxiety, Lunin set about searching.

He circled over the sea at various altitudes, going far away from the combat area and returning to it, and gradually he began to lose hope. Then he searched without hope, merely postponing his return to the station till the last possible moment. How could he go back without Serov.

Below him he suddenly spotted two planes skimming over the waves. They were flying so low that from above they seemed to be touching the water. It was a chase. The Messerschmitt was chasing Serov. Held down on the water, Serov dodged without firing. He must have run out of ammunition.

Lunin dived on the German from above and had scarcely touched the trigger when the Messerschmitt turned over, plunged into the water belly upwards and disappeared. Serov soared up in a climb and wobbled his wings to Lunin. They flew back to the station together. As they walked across the airfield, Lunin felt such affection for Serov that his shoulder seemed to brush Serov's of its own accord.

Lunin and Serov sometimes talked together at night when the others were asleep.

They would go to bed immediately after supper, utterly exhausted. Chepelkin, Kabankov, and Baiseitov would fall asleep as soon as their heads touched the pillow, and they could sleep on any length of time until they were woken. Kabankov and Chepelkin woke up in the same position as they had gone to sleep, not having moved the whole night. Baiseitov tossed in his sleep, starting up, moaning, and muttering something rapidly in his native Azerbaijan. Rassokhin spent the nights at the command post and Lunin did not know how he slept. Lunin himself, in spite of his tiredness, sometimes could not fall asleep

for a long time. And more than once he noticed that Serov in the next bed was also lying with his eyes open.

"Why aren't you asleep?" Lunin asked once.

"I don't know," Serov replied. "Just thinking."

The yellow light of the oil-lamp gleamed in his eyes. Probably about his wife, Lunin thought.

"I wrote to the education department and asked where one of their schools had been evacuated to," Serov said. "The answer came today."

"What did they tell you?"

"They say they don't know yet, but as soon as they find out they'll let me know."

"That's good," Lunin said.

"Yes, it is," Serov agreed uncertainly. It seemed as if he wanted to say something else, but could not get it out.

For a short time neither of them spoke.

"Have you been married long?" Lunin asked.

"I'm not married."

"Aren't you?" Lunin said in surprise. "But you told me you had two children."

"They aren't my children," Serov said. "But it's the same as if they were."

There was a long silence. Lunin thought Serov had gone to sleep. But suddenly Serov said:

"She can't love me, that's how I look at it."

"Why on earth not?" Lunin exclaimed. "Why can't she? Is she so much better than you?"

"Much better!" Serov said.

"In what way?"

"In everything."

"For example?"

"For example, she knows more."

"Rubbish," Lunin said. "She knows one kind of thing, you know another."

There was another long silence. Now it was Serov who thought Lunin had gone to sleep. And then, with no apparent connection, Lunin said:

"Love who you like. Love's not a matter of duty. It's being deceived, that's what I can't stand."

He turned over, crunching the straw in his paillasse, and covered his head with the blanket.

In the last weeks of September, the Germans, still unconvinced that Leningrad could not be taken by storm, brought up huge air reinforcements and tried to crush the city's resistance by intensive bombing. They bombed Leningrad, Kronstadt, and the fleet almost continuously. Anti-aircraft guns roared day and night along the banks of the Neva and its tributaries, and the Marquis Pool. Armadas of Junkers, each numbering scores, came over, one after another, with mechanical persistence. Sometimes they attacked simultaneously from different points. Squadrons of Soviet fighters took off to intercept them. Among these squadrons were the six aircraft commanded by Rassokhin.

Almost uninterrupted aerial combat went on every day from dawn to sunset. The aircraft would return to the station, and for a few minutes the pilots could lie in the grass while the mechanics filled the tanks and reloaded the guns, then they would take off again, and there was more fighting. Lunin no longer felt cold inside when the six of them without a moment's hesitation swooped down on a formation of eighty huge aircraft, into the concentrated fire of one hundred and sixty machine-guns. Habit had dulled his impressionability. By now he knew the Junkers very well, their slowness and clumsiness in the air, and was conscious of his superiority over them. He knew their blind spots, where he was out of range of their guns. He had even learned how to use the manœuvrability of his plane to hide in these great herds of Junkers from his constant pursuers, the Messerschmitt-109s.

When attacking the Junkers he no longer felt he was dodging about wildly among plaited thongs of machine-gun

bullets. Like the others, he, too, could now recount in detail everything that had happened during a battle and judge the part each man had played in it. Now he understood Rassokhin's tactics—the only possible tactics in the face of such numerical superiority—never to allow oneself to be diverted from the main task, which was to prevent the Germans making their bombing runs.

They intercepted one armada after the other and forced them to drop their bombs in the water. The Junkers were afraid of them and took evasive action or withdrew at the sight of them approaching. And yet there were too many Junkers for them to stem the onslaught completely. While they were breaking up one armada, another would appear and bomb the target.

The fleet lying in the roads between Kronstadt and Peterhof prevented the Germans from having a quiet life in Peterhof. With powerful naval guns shelling them day and night the Germans could neither concentrate their forces nor build fortifications. The only thing the Germans could do was to hurl their bombers against the fleet in an attempt to destroy it from the air. Throughout September an incessant battle was waged between the German air force and the Baltic Fleet. On September 25 the Germans at last succeeded in crippling the cruiser *Sokol.*

Lunin saw it happen, when their squadron were trying to repel an attack by one hundred and thirty Junkers. As usual, the Junkers shied away from the Soviet fighters, but they were spread out over a great area of sky and nothing could prevent them slipping round on the flank and making for the ships. The explosion on the *Sokol* was so powerful that Lunin felt it in the air. For some time the ship was wrapped in black smoke and Lunin was able to examine her only on his way back, after pursuing the Junkers, which had at once taken flight.

The *Sokol* had begun to settle in the water, but the sea was not deep and the ship's decks and superstructure were still above the surface. The huge guns protruding

from the turrets like splayed fingers were moving. Shattered, half under water, she went on firing. She was still firing the next day, and the day after, and the day after that, and for many more days, immobile, settled deep in the water, within full view of the German-held coast.

And when the Germans eventually consolidated Peterhof and brought up shore batteries, and the other ships retired to the mouth of the Neva, she remained alone in her former position and maintained her fire. She had become a kind of new fort of Kronstadt, the nearest of all to the enemy.

They saw her on every flight. Sometimes, if the guns were not moving, they would think there was no more life in her, and they would dive low over her, only a few feet above the smoke-stacks. And every time they would see men of the Red Fleet, in their black naval jackets, still nested miraculously in her turrets. The *Sokol* was alive and unvanquished.

In these last days of September they did not talk much and they never spoke of the *Sokol.* It was their task to protect the fleet from air attacks, and the *Sokol,* with her decks awash but guns still firing, was a reproach to them. Only Baiseitov did not feel this need for restraint. Every time he came back from a flight he would say: "Did you see the *Sokol*? Still bashing away!"

And he would praise the *Sokol* loudly and at great length.

Baiseitov was still the same, with a sombre passionate gleam in his dark eyes, still glancing over his shoulder. But he had become very thin in the course of the month, which made him look like a great bird of prey; and he talked even more volubly in his sleep. He had never deserted his leader again, and now defended Rassokhin in battle with a kind of defiant fearlessness. Rassokhin no longer reprimanded him, and more than once Lunin noticed that when he glanced at Baiseitov, there was an expression akin to pity in his eyes.

Lunin, too, was sorry for Baiseitov. He had a feeling that Baiseitov had not been able to stand the strain, that something inside him had snapped. The torture they all experienced from the knowledge that the enemy had advanced so far, their hatred of the invaders, the ever-present possibility of death, the appalling fatigue, everything that made them more restrained and silent, made him restless and wildly talkative, made him sing of a glorious death, and dream of lone hunting, of some unbelievable feat of valour.

Baiseitov was in love with Hilda; everyone knew about it, and so did Hilda.

In practice Baiseitov's love showed itself only in the fact that he never took his eyes off Hilda all through breakfast, dinner, and supper. Fair and sprightly, she was so unlike this big dark man that he seemed to regard her as a kind of miracle. Before the war, he would probably have been able to express his feelings in some other way, but now he had no time, and what was more, no strength. He was terribly tired, dark shadows of fatigue lurked in the hollows under his big eyes. He could only gaze at her with intense and sombre admiration, turning his head as she moved round the table with the plates. She felt his gaze and sometimes she, too, would glance at him, with embarrassment, fright, and pity in her bright, rather simple eyes.

He was killed early in October; he died bravely, defending Rassokhin. They were both flying along the coast of the Gulf of Finland between Lisy Nos and Sestroretsk. There was a fine drizzle in the air and visibility was down to three hundred yards. In this damp gloom they were caught unawares by Messerschmitts. A Messerschmitt dived suddenly on Rassokhin's tail and Rassokhin would certainly have been shot down had Baiseitov been a fraction of a second late. But Baiseitov was not late. He opened fire on the German plane and it plunged away in a spin. Then Baiseitov should have looked round, but he, who

was always looking round, this time did so too late. And a second Messerschmitt that he had not seen attacked him from behind, killed him, and disappeared in the rainy murk.

Two aircraft fell one after the other on a broad coastal bank, on the cold, wet sand. Only a few hundred yards lay between them. In spite of the rain, they blazed so fiercely that it was a long time before the infantrymen who came running up were able to approach them.

As soon as he got back to the station, Rassokhin climbed into a lorry and drove away. At supper Hilda was crying. Tears again gathered round her chin and again she could not wipe them because her hands were full of plates.

Rassokhin returned late at night and walked into the cabin with the rain dripping off him. No one was asleep.

"Is he buried?" Kabankov asked.

Rassokhin nodded.

"Now there are five of us," he said.

The rain that had started that day fell continuously; the airfield became sodden, yellow leaves whirled in the wind, and the German air attacks suddenly dwindled almost to nothing.

2

By the middle of autumn the Germans at last realized that Leningrad could not be taken by storm.

At the beginning of September they had come right up to the city outskirts, but since then they had not advanced a single inch.

For seven weeks they had hurled hundreds of bombers every day against the city, and they had achieved nothing. They had shelled the city with heavy artillery, their tank attacks had been incessant, they threw more and more fresh divisions into the battle, but Leningrad remained unshaken.

The Germans could not believe they had been stopped. They had been fighting for two years, they had subjugated

the whole of Europe, and no one had ever been able to stop them anywhere. They continued attacking stubbornly, but the only result was that their air armadas dwindled, their tanks became heaps of scrap-iron, their divisions flagged and melted away.

In October the Germans had launched their offensive against Moscow and its progress had not been all that Hitler's commanders could have wished. The nearer they got to Moscow, the stronger was the resistance they encountered. According to their plans, Moscow should have been taken long before, but they had not even reached it. They suffered enormous losses, their reserves were giving out, and the winter cold was approaching. They abandoned the assault of Leningrad, and withdrawing nearly all their air forces from the Leningrad front, transferred them to Moscow, to assist the offensive there. Thus, by their unprecedentedly stubborn resistance, the defenders of Moscow assisted the defenders of Leningrad.

Naturally the Germans had not given up the idea of capturing Leningrad. They had decided to deal with the city by another method, a method that seemed to them infallible.

Having failed to overcome the soldiers defending Leningrad, they now hoped to overcome its civilian population.

The city's food supplies began to disappear in September. In October nothing could be obtained on the ration cards except bread. And the bread ration was so small that Slava could eat two days' issue for the whole family at one sitting.

Sonya did not understand at first what this meant. Carried away by her duties on the roof and in the shelter, she decided it must be something temporary and of no real importance. At home they still had a small stock of groats and potato flour that Mummy had laid in before she went away, and Grandad was in charge of them. He

still cooked the dinner every day as usual. Now it consisted of a single dish that was rather difficult to define; it might have been soup, porridge, or blancmange. Every day, however, this dish became less and less like blancmange and porridge, and more and more like soup.

"Can I have some more, Grandad?" Slava would say, having spooned his plate clean in a few seconds.

Grandad would pour him another helping.

"Why don't you eat, Grandad?" Sonya would ask.

"Eat again! I had enough in the kitchen while I was cooking," Ilya Yakovlevich would reply.

And Sonya believed him.

Grandad divided the bread into portions and gave them one piece each in the morning, at dinner, and in the evening. Sonya and Slava would eat their pieces in one mouthful, drink hot tea without sugar and run off somewhere; they always had plenty to occupy them.

Had anyone asked Sonya in those last days of October if she was starving, she would have been very surprised. Of course, she was hungry, very hungry. She had a constant empty feeling inside, a nagging ache that never left her. But she got used to this feeling and scarcely noticed it; it even seemed as if it had always been there.

Grandad's stocks had run out, and now he made soup only on days when something was available in the shops—dried vegetables or cabbage leaves. On other days he would say: "Let's have some tea."

And they drank tea.

Grandad became silent. He would stare at the faces of the two children and the strange attentive expression in his eyes would make them feel uncomfortable, miserable.

"You ought to do less running about," he said to them once. "You ought to sit down more."

"Why, Grandad?"

"Oh, I don't know," he replied. "To save up."

Like Sonya, Slava no longer went to school and was not a bit sorry about it. In September, he spent all his time

on the roof and in the yard, watching the air battles. He knew perfectly every type of Soviet and German aircraft and could recognize them at any distance. He had run completely wild this autumn and only came home to eat and sleep. By October he was no longer satisfied with the yard and roof of his own house and every day he would roam farther afield. He told Sonya and his grandfather what was happening in the remotest parts of the city. When dinner became a tea-drinking ceremony, he did not always come back for dinner.

One morning he went out very early and was away the whole day. The day was cold and overcast, wet snow was falling, a raw wind blew, and the waters of the Neva were high and foaming.

"Where's Slava?" Grandad kept asking. "Hasn't he come in yet?"

"He'll come," Sonya would reply.

But she herself was worried. Wrapping a woollen shawl round her head, she ran out several times to search the neighbouring yards. At dusk she was about to go out once again, when he at last appeared.

He was muddy from head to foot. Even his blue, chilled face was splashed with mud. But he was pleased, under his wet eyebrows his eyes shone with triumph.

"There!" he said.

And he turned six big dirty potatoes out of his pockets on to the table.

"Where did you get them?" Grandad asked.

"Never mind that. . . ."

"No, you tell us where you got them!" Sonya snapped angrily.

She was afraid he had been stealing.

"I dug them up."

"Dug them up? Where?"

"That's my business. Out of the ground. I found seven, but I've eaten one."

"Raw?"

"Yes. Now I know the place. Next time I'll go farther."

"There won't be a next time," Grandad said.

Slava merely whistled in reply. Grandad went into the kitchen to cook the potatoes. Sonya insisted they should have two potatoes each, but Grandad cut them up so small that there was no checking how much each of them got. Out of an old phial, that he had used for his work, Grandad scraped up a whole spoonful of cod-liver oil. The fried potatoes smelling strongly of fish were delicious. Sonya and Slava ate theirs in the dining-room. Grandad assured them that he had eaten his portion while he was cooking.

It was only when she had eaten those marvellous chips that Sonya felt real hunger. She wanted to eat so badly that she woke up at night from hunger. In the morning the agonizing feeling of emptiness increased and she did not know what to do with herself. Slava, as soon as he had drunk some tea and eaten his piece of bread, went out. She realized he was going for potatoes and said nothing.

She waited for him the whole day. It was frosty, the first frosty day of the year; the puddles of the day before were frozen and soft dry snow was floating down. Slava returned at dusk. He was empty-handed; the frozen earth was too hard to dig.

Next day, on the staircase, Sonya met a neighbour who lived opposite, in No. 27. She had changed a great deal. Sonya looked at her keenly.

"Got thinner, have I?" the woman asked.

Perhaps she had indeed got thinner. But that was not the main difference in her. Her whole body seemed to have shrunk, her face was dark.

"I keep getting thinner and thinner," she whispered quickly. "I can't keep my skirt up! What's going to happen to us, Sonya dear? We'll all die."

Her mouth was half-open, her lips trembling.

"We shan't die," Sonya said grimly. "But they will."

"Who are they?"

"The Germans."

The woman stared at her doubtfully.

"You think so? Why?"

Sonya had no idea why. It had just come out unexpectedly. There was no explanation. And so she added significantly: "You'll see."

And she walked away.

3

The German offensive had been repelled, raids on the city and the ships had become rare. But everyone realized that it was only a lull. Day in, day out, from morning to evening, the squadron circled over shore and sea, searching for a glimpse of the enemy in the dense mist that now hung constantly over land and water.

That autumn the frosts came early and the rain-soaked earth froze solid under a light coating of snow. The airfield became as hard as iron and was full of ruts and pot-holes. When taking off and landing, the planes bucked and jolted, and at every bump they seemed about to fall to pieces. The earth was like iron, the air was laden with frost, but the sea froze slowly and dense steam rose day and night from the warm open water. This steam formed a mist that no wind could disperse and everyone knew that the mist would not clear until the sea was frozen over.

The planes iced up and became heavy as flat-irons; their weight dragged them down towards the sea and the forests. The pilots had to be careful not to lose each other in the air, all flying had to be done by instruments, and the constant mental strain made Lunin so tired by the evening that he lost the ability to talk.

He was no longer a newcomer to the squadron, he felt as if he had been in it for years, as if his whole life could be divided into two periods, the first, a distant, almost unreal life that had lasted until the day when he arrived

at the station, and this new life that had begun since then; and both periods seemed equally long. Serov, Rassokhin, Kabankov, and Chepelkin, from whom he was never separated in flight, on the airfield, in the mess, even in sleep, he now knew as well as he knew himself, and he sometimes wondered how there could have been a time when he had never heard of their existence.

Now the evenings were endlessly long, impenetrably dark, and the pilots spent them together in their warmly-heated cabin. Worn out from flying his ice-coated aircraft through mist, rain and wet snow, Lunin would lie on his bed, hands behind his head, and stare fixedly at the flame of the oil-lamp. Serov would lie on the bed next to his. But Kabankov and Chepelkin did not go to bed. They were younger than Lunin and tougher than Serov, and for them the strain was not so great.

As for the little Kabankov, he seemed to be made not of flesh and bones, but of tightly coiled steel springs. Even Lunin, who had long been accustomed to pilots being tough and physically fit, was amazed at the strength, agility, and light-footedness of Kabankov. Kabankov did not walk, he bounced like a ball. Indoors he would leap over beds and chairs without the slightest effort or noise; the fair lock of hair on his forehead would tremble slightly and that was all. He was very fond of dancing. It was always a dance that began the strange performance to which Kabankov treated his comrades of an evening.

He would suddenly start skipping and hopping about, moving his shoulders and snapping his fingers, and humming faint snatches of a tune to himself. Gradually his hopping would grow higher and higher and he would come down on his haunches, clapping his hands and slapping his knees, then he would twist his short little legs, like bits of rubber, and fly soundlessly from one corner of the room to the other. Serov would lie watching him with a quiet affectionate smile on his lips. Chepelkin's round pink face would beam with anticipation and boyish

delight. And Kabankov's dance would get wilder and faster until he was whirling in the air with his feet scarcely touching the floor. Every part of his body, every limb was dancing—arms, legs, stomach, shoulders. Only his intently serious face remained as impassive as a mask. He would stop singing and only short whoops would spring from his half-open lips:

"Ekh! Ekh! Ekh!"

Crouching down and throwing out his arms, he would spin round Chepelkin, challenging him to dance. Chepelkin, clumsy and embarrassed, would press back against the wall and get into the corner. Then without interrupting his impetuous dance for a second Kabankov would start pummelling him hard and painfully with his little fists. Chepelkin would retreat before him, grinning shyly and making helpless gestures with his arms. When he was finally chased out of his corner into the centre of the room, he, too, would begin to dance—out of self-defence. His movements were slow and ponderous. With the little Kabankov whirling round him, he looked like a bear. Reluctantly he would hop from one foot to the other, bend his knees and jump up again, but little by little he would be caught up in the rhythm of the dance, his bending and jumping would get faster and faster, and his broad face would crack into a huge delighted grin.

Sometimes at such moments Rassokhin would come into the cabin. Halting in the doorway, his blue eyes narrowed slyly, he would shout:

"Trying to break the floor boards again?"

"That's right!" Kabankov would whoop challengingly, although the only danger to the floor was Chepelkin, whose elephantine leaps shook the walls and made the lamp splutter and the window-panes rattle mournfully.

Rassokhin would sit down on Baiseitov's empty bed, and leaning forward with his legs wide apart, gaze steadily at the dancers. Then a gentle, almost dreamy expression would appear on his leathery, freckled face.

"Why don't you play us a tune, Kab?" he would say.

Chepelkin would skid to a halt, seize Kabankov's arm and repeat pleadingly: "Play something, play something, Igor!"

Kabankov would neither refuse nor consent. Either he himself did not know whether to play or not, or perhaps he simply liked to keep them in suspense. After flying across the room once more, he would sit down on his bed, not at all out of breath, take a torn sock out from under his pillow, and a needle and thread, and apparently oblivious to all requests, start darning. His nimble girlish fingers would work deftly with the needle.

Then Serov, too, would add his voice to the general pleading:

"Yes, give us a spot of music, Igor."

"Throw that sock of yours away!" Rassokhin would shout impatiently.

But Kabankov would not hurry. Finally laying aside his sock, he would start some other job. He would kneel down at his locker and begin sorting out the bottles, letters, naval buttons, and boxes of tooth powder that it contained. And only when everybody had got tired of waiting and begun to talk about something else, would he suddenly pull an accordion out from under his bed, sit down cross-legged, rest the accordion on his knee, and sweep it out to its full extent.

He never played any set tune; all the time he would skip with amazing ease from one melody to another. And he never played anything twice. He could never repeat anything, even if he was asked. There was no beginning or end to what he played; it simply flowed out of him in a lively, varied flood, without any effort on his part. The great charm and power of his playing lay in the ease, the spontaneity and unexpectedness with which he switched from one melody to another. A blaze of merriment would suddenly melt into such tender sadness that Chepelkin's eyes would fill with tears and even Rassokhin would

look moved. Then, as if delighting in the power he had over them, Kabankov would break into something sweeping and joyful, full of happiness and high spirits. In his music, as in himself, there was something whole and firm—a faith in the endurance and unconquerable strength of what he loved.

Lunin listened with his eyes closed and everyone thought he was asleep. He did doze off at times, but even when half-asleep he still went on thinking. Waves of sound rolled through him, and his thoughts were not thoughts, but rather pictures that rose haphazardly in his mind. Usually they were simply a repetition of what he had seen during the day. Mist, mist, mist, and suddenly a dull gleam of water under one wing and a glimpse of the turrets of the half-sunken *Sokol*, close but scarcely visible. The shore, a brittle crust of ice, the sparse firs of Peterhof, only their tops rising out of the mist. Then bright streams of tracer bullets coming towards him. Stick back, up another six hundred feet. Now he was turning to the left. Now he was over the city. Mist. He could not see anything, just vague outlines of streets revolving and heaving when he turned. The city had guts! . . . They must be having a grim time, very grim. . . . But was it grim only for Leningrad? . . . Germans pounding over the first thin snow towards Moscow. Huge pincers from north and south—Kalinin, Bryansk, Orel. Yes, Orel. The Germans had got right to the heart of the country. The Oka region, the most Russian of all Russian places. The Donets Basin, Odessa, Mariupol. They kept advancing, advancing, advancing, and we were retreating all the time. Towns, villages. It was grim. . . . Lisa used to live here, in Leningrad, Mokhovaya Street. Used to live with her mother. Last time he had seen Lisa's mother had been in 1930. Still quite a young woman then. Didn't like him, couldn't stand him. Perhaps she was still living here, perhaps he had flown over her house today. She must know where Lisa had gone. . . . Did it matter. . . . Everything was finished between them. . . .

Kabankov was one of those gifted people whose talent showed itself not in one particular thing, but in everything he did. He not only danced and played, he could also draw and write verses. Since the first day of the war he had at his own desire been producing a daily news-sheet entitled *Battle Sheet.* Under his bed he kept a packet of paper and every day he would take a sheet out of the packet and make up the daily issue. He had not missed a single day. Number 100 came out on the hundredth day of the war. On each of these days he had been in battle, each day he had gone through enough to last another man a lifetime, but *Battle Sheet* always came out. He had become so quick at the job that the whole thing took him only fifteen minutes. He would stick it up sometimes in the mess, sometimes in the cabin, sometimes in the command post. The pilots and mechanics waited every day with curiosity to see what would be in the current number.

There was not much text in the "sheet"; it was all drawings, most of them funny, in red and blue pencil. Kabankov had a gift for sketching. a man with two or three strokes, so that anyone would know him. His subject was usually provided by something that had happened that day, often something quite trivial. Hilda, frightened by a rat, had jumped on to the table. Chepelkin was running to her aid with a poker, obviously afraid of the rat himself. The caption read: "He has twelve enemy aircraft to his credit." Or Lanky Deyev, one of the mechanics, was depicted as a doctor with sick aircraft queueing up to see him, their wings crumpled, fuselages riddled with holes, propellers twisted, engines dropping out. And the caption: "This way for resurrection." Or it was Chepelkin again. Flying over the sea, he had taken a drifting log for an enemy launch and was busily shooting it up.

Kabankov's "sheet" devoted particular attention to the misadventures of the German aces, and these sketches, too, were all authentic and based on happenings witnessed by the whole squadron. In an attempt to get away from

Rassokhin a Junkers had made a bad turn and hit a pine-tree. At the sight of approaching Soviet fighters five Junkers hastily dropped their bombs—on their own troops. A Messerschmitt escorting a Junkers swerved clumsily and flew into the Junkers. All these sketches confirmed something that experience had proved to them already: as flyers and fighters they had greater skill than the Germans, the enemy was superior to them only in numbers.

Besides his sketches, Kabankov put his poems in the "sheet." Actually they were not poems, but one long poem, which, like Kabankov's music, had neither beginning nor end. It was called "Vengeance." It came out in instalments, and under the title of every instalment there was always the bracketed word "continuation," and after the last line, "to be continued." Unlike the sketches, the poem contained no humour. Kabankov wrote about what he thought and saw, and often recalled Novgorod, where he had been born and grown up.

To Novgorod my thoughts are ever turning,
A little house my memory recalls;
I see, in all its ancient glory,
Cathedral proud beyond the Kremlin walls.

But you laid waste that noble Russian city,
That humble house of mine you put to flame;
And now you boast, with dreams of richer pillage,
The fate of Leningrad will be the same.

Vain are your dreams! For all your bloody slaughter,
For all your bestial greed and wanton vice,
For every item on the score against you,
You'll pay the price!

Anything of importance that happened to the pilots in battle appeared in the next day's instalment of the poem. When Chepelkin, whom he was always making fun

of in his sketches, got himself surrounded by four Messerschmitts and was saved only because all the rest of the squadron came at once to his aid, Kabankov wrote:

It was a narrow shave for old Chepelkin;
The Messerschmitts were closing for the kill—
We came—they went—and now it's welcome
home, boy!
It's good to have you flying with us still!

He wrote of the Germans not so much with scorn as with disgust, as if to mock them because their plans had not succeeded.

We'll go on taking all that you can send us,
We'll go on seeing, straight ahead, our goal;
But you, when peeping from your dug-outs,
See less than rabbit peeping from its hole.

Of all Kabankov's gifts the one that amazed Lunin most was his ability to write poetry. Lunin had met people who could dance and play the accordion and draw amusing sketches, but this was the first time he had met somebody who could write poetry. What amazed him was that, although they lived in the same room, he had never seen Kabankov writing it. Where and when did he write his poetry? And one day, when he happened to be alone with Kabankov, he asked him about it.

"I don't write it, I make it up," Kabankov said. "Whenever I get the chance. Flying usually."

And that surprised Lunin even more. How could one make up poetry when all one's attention was concentrated on not losing oneself in the mist, not losing one's comrades, not crashing into the forest, not missing one of Rassokhin's orders, not forgetting one's instruments, the swift variations of their needles, above all, not missing the enemy?

Kabankov was political commissar of the squadron and Lunin was not at all surprised at the fact. Although it would have been a valid question to ask why Kabankov was commissar. He had never been attached to any political department of the service; his only educational qualifications were those he had gained at flying school. He was a member of the Party, of course, but so was Serov.

It appeared that Kabankov had become squadron commissar only the day before Lunin's arrival. At the beginning of the war there had been another commissar in the squadron, a groundstaff officer, a regular political worker. During the evacuation of Tallinn, he had been drowned in the Gulf of Finland, like many other members of the division. When it had arrived at this station, the squadron had been without a commissar. But the recently appointed division commissar had paid them a visit, spent the night with the pilots, talked to them, heard Kabankov play the accordion, looked through his news-sheets and, before he left, appointed Kabankov commissar of the squadron.

This had been a surprise to everyone. It had never occurred to any of them that Kabankov would be commissar. As soon as the appointment was made, however, they all felt it was the most natural thing that could have happened. In fact, Kabankov had been something like a commissar even before, when he ranked as an ordinary pilot. The other men liked him, respected him, listened to his opinion, and without making any speeches or trying to give orders, he had for a long time, though unaware of it himself, been carrying out the duties of commissar. Chief among these duties was that he took an interest in every man and tried to understand him. And when he understood him, he tried to help, or advise, or put him right. Possibly he would always have been like that, even had he not become commissar. And even had he not been appointed commissar, they would probably all have felt that after Rassokhin he was chief among them.

Nevertheless, in the early days it would not have been easy for Kabankov to do his job as commissar but for mechanic Deyev, the squadron Party organizer.

Every plane had its own mechanic, the "plane master," as he was called. If, in spite of the enormous engine strain, in spite of the constant shooting up they had to endure, the squadron's five aircraft were still flying, it was only thanks to the mechanics. At night, while the pilots slept, the mechanics tested the engines, replaced parts that were worn out, and patched up the bullet holes. It was hard, exhausting work; there were no set hours, and no mistakes were permitted. The mechanics had no time to eat or sleep, their fingers became cracked and swollen from the frost. But more gruelling than the work and the lack of sleep was the feeling of responsibility. It was the mechanic who made the aircraft ready for take-off, it was the mechanic who took charge of the aircraft when it landed. And everyone knew that the smallest mistake on the part of a mechanic could lead to the death of a pilot, the loss of his aircraft, a defeat in battle. While the aircraft were in the air, while they fought it out with the Germans somewhere beyond the horizon, the mechanics waited on the airfield with strained, tense faces. Their eyes never left the sky. Would the planes appear, would they come back? And when an aircraft popped up over the fir-trees, coming in to land, its "master" would recognize it instantly and try to guess by its flight and the sound of its engine whether it was all right, whether the pilot was safe and sound.

These constant hours of anxiety for the lives of the men who flew made every mechanic treat his pilot with a special kind of solicitous affection. The mechanic would keep looking into his pilot's eyes to see if he had slept properly. Perhaps he wanted a drink, perhaps he was cold, perhaps his chin strap was too tight? He did everything he could to help his pilot, to make his job easier, to reassure him, to save him unnecessary work.

"Our mechanics are like nurşemaids," Kabankov would say. "We've each got a nursemaid."

And the most devoted of all the nursemaids was Deyev, who looked after Kabankov. This lanky, long-limbed mechanic treated little Kabankov with paternal affection. It was amusing to watch them working together on a plane, and many fantastic stories were told about them. The squadron wags declared, for example, that Deyev picked Kabankov up in his arms and lifted him into his cabin like a baby, and that Kabankov regularly walked between Deyev's legs. Kabankov could not, of course, walk between Deyev's legs, but he could certainly walk under Deyev's outstretched arm, scarcely bending at all, and he often did so to amuse his friends.

Deyev was over thirty and he looked upon the world around him with attentive, serious eyes, in which there was both tenderness and severity. He had received no news of his family, who were stranded somewhere in the Smolensk Region, under German occupation, but he bore his anxiety in silence, making no complaint. He was one of those calm, persistent, unassuming men who shouldered the heavy burden of war without bowing under it. The whole squadron treated him with particular respect, although there was nothing striking about him. The squadron's former Party organizer had been killed near Tallinn, and Deyev had taken over the job. And when Kabankov was made commissar, Deyev set about helping him just as attentively and efficiently as he helped him on the airfield with his plane.

One of his duties as commissar worried Kabankov for a long time—lecturing on current affairs. It was rather strange, for usually he could talk to any man on any subject. And he knew what to talk about—about the people's sufferings, about the responsibility that every man bore for his country, for the future of all countries, about steadfastness, about duty, about faith in victory. But when faced with the attentive eyes of all the squadron mecha

ics and fitters who had been assembled especially to hear him, he seemed to lose his voice, all his thoughts would disappear, and he could find nothing to say except a few wooden phrases out of the newspapers. And then Deyev would come to his aid. Deyev would ask Kabankov some question or other, and without waiting for a reply, would answer it himself in a calm, quiet, but completely audible voice. And that would start things off. Forgetting the official nature of the occasion, Kabankov would join in the conversation, and usually he would talk very well, in a fiery, straightforward manner. Others would join in, and if there was time, the talk would be a long one.

"I just can't get on without you," Kabankov complained to Deyev. "I always need you as a sort of spring-board."

"You'll get used to it," Deyev would say. "It's easy enough to learn to talk. The main thing is to take an interest in people. People are the main thing."

But Kabankov knew that himself.

When he was tired and depressed, Lunin often noticed Kabankov's attentive glance directed on him. There was something about Lunin that Kabankov wanted to understand but could not. And Lunin had not the slightest desire to help him. Kabankov, of course, realized this and did not ask any questions. Only once he remarked casually to Lunin: "I notice you never write any letters, Major."

"None at all," Lunin replied.

The conversation ended there. And Kabankov never made any further attempt to discover something that Lunin himself would not discuss.

On the other hand, Kabankov was fully initiated into the story of Serov's love-affair. In the middle of October an event took place that shook Serov badly; he at last received a letter from the district education department informing him where the school he had asked about had been evacuated. The letter mentioned a town in the Molotov Region that no one in the squadron had ever heard of. Kabankov at once went off to the command post and

triumphantly returned with a map on which the town was shown.

Serov spread the map out on his bed and everyone bent over it. The name of the town was already thickly underlined in ink. Kabankov tried to persuade Serov of the advantages of the place; it was a district centre, only a stone's throw from the city of Molotov, there was a river quite near, the climate was healthy, and not a single German aircraft could ever reach it. Serov listened to him, nodding despondently.

"Now sit down and write a letter," Kabankov said.

"All right," said Serov.

But he did not sit down and did not write any letters.

To everybody's surprise, the news did not overjoy Serov; on the contrary, it seemed to upset him. He was unusually pale and silent. Lunin woke up several times during the night and always Serov was awake and staring up at the ceiling, his eyes gleaming in the darkness. The next morning Serov scarcely touched his breakfast. As he walked across the airfield to his aircraft, he halted several times and stood stock-still until Lunin called out to him.

In the evening Kabankov asked: "Letter ready?"

"Not yet. . . ."

"Hurry up then. I've got a wonderful chance for you."

The following day a transport plane would be taking off from one of the Leningrad airfields on a trip to Molotov for spare parts; the pilot was an old friend of Kabankov's and a very reliable man. Two armourers from the squadron would be going to the airfield in question and they could take the letter along.

The chance of sending a letter by this means was extremely important, for since the Germans had captured the south shore of Lake Ladoga, letters had been taking six weeks or more to arrive, and personal telegrams were simply not accepted at the Leningrad telegraph offices.

Serov, however, said nothing in reply to Kabankov's suggestion and did not write a letter that evening.

In the small hours Lunin was awakened by a loud sigh. Serov was sitting on the edge of his bed, his bare feet dangling over the floor. He looked even taller and thinner than usual.

"What's up?" Lunin asked. "Can't you sleep?"

Evidently Serov was at the end of his tether.

"When I went to see her, the school still hadn't left," he said. "It didn't leave until six days later."

Lunin did not understand. In a hoarse, excited whisper Serov tried to explain. In the middle of August he had flown back from Tallinn to Peterhof. From Peterhof he had been allowed to go to Leningrad for a few hours. He had visited his friend's flat and an old woman living there had told him that she had been evacuated from the city with her school. And now from the letter it appeared the school had not left the city until six days after Serov's visit.

"Well, what about it?" Lunin asked as calmly as he could.

But he realized himself that there was something wrong. Poor Serov!

"She didn't want to see me," Serov said. "So she told her neighbour to say she'd gone away."

"What are you blathering about!" an angry voice suddenly shouted from Kabankov's bed. "How the hell do you know that? You don't know a thing. Why make up a lot of rubbish about her?"

He threw off his blanket and ran over to Serov. Barefooted, he looked even smaller than usual. His little face was red with anger.

Wakened by the noise, Chepelkin turned over and stared with uncomprehending eyes at Serov. Serov's head dropped miserably, his lips were pale. He looked round helplessly.

"Don't be an ass!" Kabankov shouted at him without any attempt at restraint. "Sit down at once and write that letter. You've still got an hour before reveille. Hurry up."

And Serov crept sheepishly to the table in his vest and pants. While he wrote there was silence. Kabankov's face still wore its angry expression. Serov wrote for a long time, then folded the letter in a triangle and wrote the address.

"Did you give her our field post-office address?" Kabankov asked.

"Yes."

"All right. Now write another letter," Kabankov said. "Take this down."

And he dictated a letter to the headmaster of the school, asking him for Maria Sergeyevna Andreyeva's address.

"That's just in case," he explained. "Now give them to me."

He took both letters and placed them under his pillow.

The letters were sent off the same day and no more was said about them. Anyhow, something else had happened to divert attention from Serov. Chepelkin had started looking at Hilda in the mess, just as Baiseitov used to.

4

Hilda was certainly good to look at, and of late she seemed to have become even better. With her slim light figure, her blue eyes, her porcelain complexion, always brightly flushed from the heat of the stove, she was pretty as a doll. Chepelkin, however, whose attitude towards her, like that of the others, had always been friendly, had never paid any particular attention to her—until the incident of the rat which Kabankov had depicted in his news-sheet. The rat was big and insolent and it dawdled fearlessly round the mess. Hilda was in the mess alone. With a piercing scream she jumped on to the table. Chepelkin, who happened to be standing in the passage, dashed into the mess. He seized the poker and took up an ex-

cellent position, barring the rat's escape route into the kitchen. The rat, which had tufts of grey hair on its flanks, backed away into the corner and surveyed Chepelkin with a pair of spiteful black eyes. Hilda stopped screaming and, still standing on the table, began to render Chepelkin advice. But Chepelkin acted irresolutely. Slowly and with some hesitation he advanced towards the rat. The rat sprang to meet him. Chepelkin stepped back, and although he lashed the floor furiously with the poker, it was too late. The rat slipped past and without any particular fear or haste vanished through the kitchen door.

Hilda jumped down from the table. She was highly indignant. Snatching the poker, she started to demonstrate what she would have done had she been Chepelkin. When Kabankov and Serov entered the mess, they were immediately told everything in detail, even where Chepelkin had stood with his poker, and where the rat had crouched. Chepelkin was disgraced. He tried to explain what an awful tail the rat had, how long and hairless it was, but Hilda glanced at him scornfully and he relapsed into silence.

Since that day a change had come over Chepelkin's attitude to Hilda and everyone noticed it. When sitting at table, he would stare at the kitchen door without saying a word. As soon as Hilda came in, two bright red spots would appear on his cheeks. As she moved round the mess, serving the plates, he did not take his eyes off her, and the spots on his cheeks would spread and contract violently. When somebody asked him a question, he would look blank and answer slowly, as though he had just woken up. What Hilda felt about it no one knew. But, of course, she noticed what was going on, and frowned when anyone mentioned the rat in her presence.

At that time, they at last received definite confirmation of something that until then had only been a vague rumour. They learned that there was starvation in Leningrad.

They were defending Leningrad and lived only a few miles from the city. They flew over it several times a day. But they saw it only from above, from a great height. They spent their lives either in the air or on the station, where there was not a single civilian.

The man among them who knew most about Leningrad was Rassokhin; various people from regiment and division headquarters came to see him and he himself went out in his lorry to division. H.Q. at Poklonnaya Hill, which was no distance from the city. He might have got to know something before the others, but had probably decided that it was no use talking about it.

None of the pilots were Leningraders. Like Lunin, they had all been born and brought up in the provinces. Rassokhin was from Vologda, Kabankov from Novgorod, Chepelkin from Smolensk, Serov from Tver. Before the war their regiment had been stationed for a fairly long time in the Kingisepp District of the Leningrad Region, but even from there it was four hours' journey to Leningrad and only Serov, who travelled to Leningrad every day-off, made the journey. But like all natives of the Russian North they had a thousand ties with Leningrad. It always astonished them with its beauty and grandeur. To them every day spent in Leningrad was happy and memorable and they all dreamed of further visits in the future. For them the name of Leningrad ranked next to that of Moscow.

And now Leningrad was starving. They learned about it from the armourers. People were collapsing from hunger in the streets, and the armourers, who had driven into the city to draw arms from the dump, had seen it happen with their own eyes. The pilots were not getting quite the same fare now, either. Before, they had been fed so well that none of them could eat it all, except perhaps Chepelkin. Now there was suddenly less of everything, both meat and cereals. Vegetables disappeared altogether. Bread was no longer put out on the table for every man to take as much

as he wanted; it was rationed out at the rate of 17 ounces a day per person.

Actually even that was enough for Lunin, though he had been accustomed to eating a lot and in spite of the enormous expenditure of energy during the long hours of flying every day. It was probably rather little for his comrades, who were younger men. But none of them expressed any dissatisfaction. As for Serov, he did not even eat all his bread ration; he would wrap up what was left and put it in his pocket.

The point was that the mechanics who serviced the aircraft were given only 10 ounces of bread a day and two plates of soup, one at dinner and the other at supper. And the news that their mechanics—those devoted, unfailingly efficient and ingenious "plane masters"—were half starved, weighed on the pilots' minds.

It was shameful and disgusting to eat when you knew that a comrade who lived with you was hungry. Serov was the first to start saving bread for his mechanic. Lunin followed Serov's example. To his surprise, his mechanic refused to take the bread. Lunin pretended to be offended, but even that did not help. Then Lunin ordered him to take it. The mechanic, who was subordinate to him, could not disobey an order and took the bread. This went on for several days, until Rassokhin got to know about it.

In the evening Rassokhin entered the cabin with a troubled angry face.

"Serov!"

They knew every tone his voice could take; obviously Serov was about to receive a rocket. Serov paled and came to attention. Rassokhin eyed him furiously from under his ginger brows.

"I suppose you have decided that the people who ration bread don't know their job?" he snapped. "You think you know better than they, so you're going to put them right? You give your bread to a mechanic, but in Leningrad children are starving. Yes, children are starving, and

we are fed, so that we may have enough strength to drive the Germans out. Can you understand that?"

He finished by turning away and saying to nobody in particular: "We can give our lives, but not bread. . . ."

There was silence. Pale-faced, Serov remained at attention. Lunin felt uncomfortable that Serov should be taking it alone, because he himself had done the same as Serov, and Rassokhin undoubtedly knew about it. But Rassokhin never reprimanded Lunin, probably because Lunin was his senior in age and rank. This time, however, after a pause, he did say: "As for you, Major, I am surprised at you."

He turned round and left the room.

It was quiet in the cabin that evening. Even Kabankov was silent and sat on his bed, grimly darning socks. Lunin lay down in his clothes, closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep. But sleep would not come to him; he knew it was useless, and after lying on his bed for about an hour and a half, he got up, flung a greatcoat over his shoulders and left the hut.

That morning there had been a thaw; it had rained all day, the snow had melted, and it was so dark outside that he could not see an arm's length in front of him. Lunin roamed about in the darkness, enjoying the sting of cold rain on his face. Suddenly he heard footsteps, and before he could step aside, bumped into Rassokhin.

"Is it you, Major?" Rassokhin asked. "Where are you going?"

"Just walking," Lunin replied.

"So am I," said Rassokhin.

They stood together, unable to see each other, and were silent. The late autumn night swirled rustling about them.

"Well, I'll be going . . ." Rassokhin said and walked off.

He stopped again, however.

"I can't get the food down either," he said.

And he walked away.

For a time Lunin did not move, then he roamed on

tripping over tangled wires left by the signallers and, bumping into a birch-tree, stopped and leaned against it. Children were starving. Lunin had no children of his own and somehow he had little to do with children in general. Perhaps it was for that reason that, when he saw children, he felt so acutely aware of their frailty, weakness, and need of protection. Whenever he looked at a child, he felt anxiety; it was so small, so lacking in knowledge, anything might hurt it, destroy it—a car, a man, a dog. And now children were starving and soon they would begin to die.

So that was why the Germans had been so quiet of late! How had it never occurred to him before? A city with millions of people in it and no supply route, caught in a noose. Stocks? How could one lay in stocks for over three million people? There must have been stocks, or they would not have lasted this long. But how much longer? Another month, two perhaps. The Germans had decided to take no risks, they would wait a bit, then advance into a dead city.... The utter cruelty of it. Everything would be intact: buildings, factories. And everywhere there would be stillness.... There would be no people, that was all.... He shivered.

And what was going on in the rest of Russia, beyond the two front lines? He had arrived here two months ago, and since then he had not seen a single person from out there. There had been only short alarming news bulletins. The army had withdrawn from Orel, Bryansk, Vyazma. Then Mariupol. That was on the Azov Sea, not far from the flying school, from his own home, his garden. Then a message had come through that the situation on the western front had worsened and the Germans had broken through in one sector. Yes, that was exactly how it had been worded. The western front meant Moscow. That had been two weeks ago. In those two weeks Odessa, Taganrog, Kharkov had fallen. What about Moscow? Heavy fighting round Moscow, that was all....

Drenched and cold, Lunin walked back reluctantly to

the cabin. For some time he could not find the porch in the darkness. When he went in, everyone was asleep, except Serov. Serov was lying with his eyes open, but noticing Lunin, closed them and pretended to be asleep.

5

The thaw lasted for several days, then the frost returned and snow began to fall. It was only the end of October, but winter seemed to have come to stay. Snow fell for many days.

They were not flying so often now, not so much because of the snow as because of the complete inactivity of the German air force. This confinement to the ground depressed them and frayed their endurance. They wanted at all costs to fly and fight, for in that critical autumn it was only by flying and fighting that they could live without a feeling of guilt.

"Surely we'll get one of them before the holiday," Kabankov would say, as he paced about the cabin, from one corner to the other, clenching his little fists.

There were only a few more days left to November 7. They all felt a special excitement at the thought of this traditional, favourite day of celebration. The enemy was threatening everything that had been created by the Revolution, everything that gave meaning to their lives. And they wanted to celebrate the anniversary of the Revolution with a blow at the enemy.

At last on the morning of November 6 the clouds began to clear. There was even a gleam of sun.

But a layer of mist about 2,500 feet thick still hung over the sea and the coast and one could look at the huge diffused red disc of the sun without blinking.

That morning, according to the observation posts, there were some German aircraft about. Only reconnaissance. They flew in pairs, keeping low in the fog and trying to

get a peep at the city, just as one peeps into a saucepan to see how the food is cooking.

"If only we can spot them and not lose them in this mist!" Kabankov said, as they ran across the beaten glittering snow to their aircraft.

In a minute Rassokhin's five aircraft were flying in V-formation through a huge rainbow of mist-refracted sunlight. They had to keep close together, for even at a short distance the next aircraft would become blurred and disappear, as if rubbed out like a pencil drawing. They flew towards Leningrad and crossed the mouth of the Neva. Not a single German aircraft anywhere. They changed course and flew over Peterhof. No Germans. Round to the right again and over Kronstadt. No Germans. Perhaps there were some somewhere, but how could you spot them, when visibility was only five hundred yards. Where to now? Back to the station as usual, without anything to show? But over Kronstadt Rassokhin turned to the west and led them out into the Gulf.

They had scarcely left Kronstadt when Lunin saw four Messerschmitts in front of him, four elongated black spots, hazy at the edges. He saw them only for a second, because Rassokhin immediately banked and led his squadron into the mist, so that the Germans would not see them. They must take the Germans by surprise.

The squadron held the same course as the Messerschmitts and, though they were invisible, flew parallel with them, to their left and higher. A minute later, Chepelkin's plane peeled off into the mist, alone.

This was a trick that they had frequently discussed in their cabin, back at the station. If the Messerschmitts discovered they were being followed by five Soviet fighters, they would avoid battle and make off, and the mist would help them get away. They had to be tempted and Chepelkin's aircraft would provide an excellent bait. A lone Soviet fighter would be sure to tempt them. Chepelkin

would lead them a dance and distract their attention. Then they would be trapped.

After Chepelkin had disappeared they held the same course for a whole minute. Then they followed Rassokhin round to the right.

They did not find the Messerschmitts immediately. The blasted fog hid everything, and while they were circling and searching, time was running out and Chepelkin might be killed. They were beginning to get really worried, when they suddenly came upon the Germans. The four Messerschmitts were snapping at Chepelkin from all sides.

But Chepelkin was quick and agile. He dodged and twisted among the streams of tracers, soaring up and dropping like a stone, and he banked so steeply that the Messerschmitts could not follow him. At the same time he fought back furiously, and just at the moment when his comrades spotted him, he killed a German pilot and one of the Messerschmitts plunged into the mist-covered sea.

That victory was followed at once by another. When the three German planes saw the Soviet planes coming and turned to beat off the attack, Chepelkin pounced on them from the rear and shot down a second Messerschmitt.

He already had two Messerschmitts to his credit before the squadron arrived to help him.

The two remaining Messerschmitts zoomed up and vanished in the mist.

That was galling. Flushed by Chepelkin's success, the squadron longed to continue the fight. They circled for some time over the sea, hoping to run into the enemy planes again. At last Lunin again caught sight of the two Messerschmitts. Unwilling to renew the action, they split up and slipped away, one to the left, the other to the right. Rassokhin, Kabankov, and Chepelkin tore after the first, Lunin and Serov after the second.

With his engine at full throttle Lunin kept the Messerschmitt in view for some time, but then it disappeared, in

a flash, as if it had never been there. Lunin just could not make out where it had got to, and for a time he swept forward on the same course, hoping to see it again. But he could see nothing, except the glittering mist with its rainbow bars of colour.

The Messerschmitt must have turned and he had failed to notice it. Lunin looked back to see if Serov was following him. Serov was not there either. There was nothing all round him except mist. He was alone.

He made one turn, then another, he doubled back and circled, hoping to run into one of the squadron. But there was not a trace of an aircraft in the sky, his own or the enemy's. He climbed out of the mist. A huge expanse unfolded before him. The pale-blue sky was cold and clear. But it was empty, not a single aircraft in sight.

Lunin's fuel was running low and it was a long way to the airfield. However, he decided to make one more attempt to find his squadron, and again plunged into the mist. It was like plunging into muddy water. Through the mist he began to make out waves on the surface of the sea, and just at that moment he caught sight of two swift shadows flashing across them. A Soviet plane was skimming the water in broad zigzags with a Messerschmitt on its tail.

It must be Serov. The Messerschmitt was right below Lunin and he had to act fast. Lunin went into a dive with his finger squeezing the trigger. The Messerschmitt banked to the right in an attempt to dodge, but its wing-tip touched a wave and the plane cart-wheeled into the water.

Meanwhile the Soviet plane had disappeared in the mist. But Lunin soon found it again and caught up with it. No, it was not Serov, it was Chepelkin.

Lunin wobbled his wings, joined up with him and started to climb. He was nearly out of fuel and he had decided to fly back above the mist, to avoid any possibility of getting lost, and to have height to spare. But Chepelkin climbed about three hundred feet and could not get

any higher. Only then did Lunin notice that there was something wrong with Chepelkin's plane.

It was moving very slowly and in jerks, like a man hopping on one foot. Perhaps the Messerschmitt had managed to get a shot in the engine? Or perhaps Chepelkin was wounded? He did not reply to Lunin when Lunin flew down and waved to him. Chepelkin might not make the distance to his home airfield. Better take him to Kronstadt and let him land there.

Kronstadt did not appear for a long time and Lunin was afraid they had flown past it. Soon, however, a white snow-covered headland surrounded by black water loomed up out of the mist. It was the deserted western tip of Kotlin Island, on which Kronstadt lay. Lunin felt a wave of relief. But to his surprise, Chepelkin did not attempt to land. He limped on slowly towards the east, over long, narrow Kotlin.

Lunin felt worried again, but he reassured himself with the thought that Chepelkin must know what he was doing. He must be wounded, but knew he could get back to the station. Well, all the better!

Lunin had flown over Kronstadt many times and he knew it well, although he had never been there. The long straight streets with their gloomy stone buildings of two centuries back, the parks and avenues lined with bare trees, stretched out below him. The huge bulk of the cathedral came out of the mist ahead. They were flying so low that the dome was above them. Beyond the cathedral were the brick walls of factories, tall black chimneys, a rigidly straight canal already covered with a thin grey film of ice. The sailors in the streets looked up to watch the planes and Lunin could see their faces clearly. Chepelkin flew even lower; Lunin thought he had decided to land after all. Even here, in the built-up part of the island, there were empty spaces where one could land. But the eastern headland loomed out of the mist and Chepelkin still flew

on and on. They passed over the last roofs and again they were over the sea. Kronstadt dropped away behind.

Lunin wanted to guide Chepelkin over the islands, on which stood the Kronstadt forts, but Chepelkin kept straight on, cutting across the Marquis Pool in the direction of Lakhta. The iridescent mist again descended on them, hiding everything. They were creeping along just above the water; now Chepelkin was in front, with Lunin about thirty yards behind him. Big, flat ice-floes with dark steaming patches of water between them stretched below.

And then, right in front of Lunin's eyes, Chepelkin's plane slowly dipped its nose into one of the gaps and sank out of sight.

Lunin felt himself shouting, although he could hear nothing above the roar of the engine. Still shouting, he kept circling round and round above the spot where Chepelkin's plane had disappeared. He was hoping Chepelkin would appear out of the water. It simply could not end like this. No, it was no use hoping. It was all over. He knew it was all over, but still he went on circling. . . .

When he came to himself, he found he had enough fuel left for three minutes. He climbed fast in the direction of the airfield. As he crossed the coastline, he saw two aircraft ahead of him. That must be Rassokhin and Kabankov on their way back. Where was Serov? As he came in to land, he saw Serov's plane on the airfield. So Serov had got back first.

Rassokhin and Kabankov, who had just landed, were standing with Serov talking to a crowd of mechanics. When Lunin climbed out of his plane and walked towards them, Kabankov turned round with bright, merry eyes.

"Major!" he shouted. "The skipper and I got another one on the way back! Not a bad way of celebrating, eh!"

Then he saw Lunin's face.

"Chepelkin?"

Lunin nodded.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Move

1

In December the yard of the big block of flats on Vasilyevsky Island was deserted and covered in deep drifts; only a few wavering paths ran from the gate to the doors. Every morning Abram the janitor would go out to fight the snow. He had grown terribly thin during the past month and looked even more like one of the

saints in an ancient ikon; he was so tall and straight, with lines of solemn grief in his dark hollow face. His wasted legs wobbled freely in a large new pair of felt boots. In his usual way he would plunge his shovel into the snow. But after two or three plunges he would suddenly stop and begin to sway strangely, as if his long body had lost its sense of balance. He would sit down on a stone pillar and, gasping for breath, look at the snow severely. He hated it but was too weak to do anything about it.

At that hour Professor Mednikov usually came out into the yard for a breath of fresh air. He would stop beside Abram, leaning on his stick with his little head thrown back proudly.

Everyone in the flats had known for a long time now that this small man of about sixty-five, with a sparrow-like but very proud face, who wore an overcoat with an expensive fur collar, a fur hat and warm overshoes, was a professor. Although nobody knew exactly what science he was engaged upon, everyone—the housewives, Abram the janitor, the naval officer who was doing some mysterious military work in a flat on the first floor—treated him with respect, because they respected science.

Usually he was silent. But sometimes he would talk to Abram. The conversation was a monologue. Abram would sit on the pillar, gazing severely at the snow, and it was impossible to tell from his face whether he was listening or not.

One day the professor held out his left arm, pushed back the cuff of his overcoat, turned down the edge of his glove and looked at his bare wrist, which was as thin as a child's. Then he began to talk in a calm, didactic tone.

"When he has no food, a man eats himself. He eats himself according to a strict system. First he eats all the fat he has succeeded in accumulating during his life, all his superfluous stocks, so to speak. Then he begins to eat his own muscles."

At that moment Sonya appeared in the open doorway

leading to the staircase. She was wearing an overcoat, a white shawl, and felt boots.

"Come indoors, Grandad, you'll get frozen," she said. "You've been out a very long time today. Are you coming, Grandad?"

But though he glanced at her, Grandad made no reply. He continued to expound his idea:

"The last part of him to remain untouched is the brain, the nervous system, man's most precious and irreplaceable possession. When a man begins to eat his own brain, he is finished."

"Are you afraid of death?" Abram asked suddenly.

The professor glanced at him haughtily.

"My own death?" he asked contemptuously. "No, I am not afraid of my own death. That is something I shall never see. While I am alive, it has no existence, and when it comes, I shall be no more. But the death of others. . . ."

He frowned and fell silent.

"People who don't surrender never die," Sonya said. "Come along, Grandad."

She pulled at the pocket of his coat and led him indoors.

The words "people who don't surrender never die" were not Sonya's own invention. She had heard them from Antonina Trofimovna.

Sonya had been out of touch with Antonina Trofimovna for a long time and had only recently met her again.

In October, when the German air-raids on the city had almost ceased, Antonina Trofimovna had suddenly disappeared from the house where Sonya lived. She did not even come back to her room to spend the night. Other women were now in charge of shelter duty and fire-watching; they had all been taught by Antonina Trofimovna and they observed to the letter the rules she had established. From these women Sonya learned that Antonina Trofimovna had been entrusted with some more important and responsible work, and that she slept at the place where she worked.

About a month later, when Sonya had been queueing for bread, a girl had told her the district committee of the Komsomol could get her a job at a munitions factory. Sonya had been thinking of working at a munitions factory for some time; it would not be the same as going to the front, of course, but she would be able to help the war effort without leaving Grandad and Slava. Till then she had been to the district committee of the Komsomol only once, in the spring, when she and some of the other girls in her form had been presented with their Komsomol membership cards by the secretary. Then the war had started, the school had gone away, and Sonya had lost all connection with the Komsomol; all she had was her membership card. This worried Sonya badly and she went to the district committee only after long hesitation.

In her hand she held her membership card, from which it was clear that she had not paid her dues for several months. That worried her most of all. But when she entered the committee office, her fears all at once disappeared. She was interviewed by quite ordinary girls in shawls and felt boots. They asked her questions and she immediately told them all about herself—about Slava, about Grandad, about the death of her mother. It turned out that it was not at all so easy to fix her up at a munitions factory; some of the factories had been evacuated, others were idle for lack of fuel, and at the most important ones, which were still working, there were enough people.

"She had better go and see Antonina Trofimovna," said one of the girls, and they all agreed.

For some reason it never occurred to Sonya that this might be the same Antonina Trofimovna. From the district Komsomol committee she was taken to the district Party committee, which was in the same building. They walked past several doors with name-plates on them, and down long corridors as cold and frosty as the street outside. Antonina Trofimovna, in a sheepskin coat, a shawl,

and felt boots, was sitting in one of the icy offices, speaking on the telephone.

"I've brought you a stray Komsomol member, Antonina Trofimovna," said the girl from the district Komsomol committee. "Have a talk with her, perhaps she'll be of some use to you."

She called Sonya "stray" not because she had actually strayed, but because she did not belong to any organization.

Antonina Trofimovna was still the same, smiling attentively from under her fair eyebrows. But her face had swollen and become puffy.

"But we're old friends," she said, recognizing Sonya at once. "What are you so surprised about? They've given me a job here now. So I sleep here. . . ."

Then she got straight down to business.

"For over a month all the baths in the city have been closed. Do you want to help me get one of them open?"

"Yes, I do," Sonya replied without a moment's hesitation.

She looked at the desk. Antonina Trofimovna's fingers, which had once been so thin and white, were stiff and swollen.

"There's no warmth in the houses now, not to mention washing facilities," Antonina Trofimovna said. "Everyone's been going to bed in their clothes for over two months. And there's not a single bath-house in the whole city. But how can we get one going? There's no fuel, no transport, there's hardly anybody who can stand. . . . Well, let's go."

She got up from her desk. Her sheepskin coat was short and a full black skirt that was not very long either stuck out from under it; she was wearing the skirt over quilted trousers tucked into her felt boots. But even in such a garb she had lost nothing of her former gracefulness.

"I've got my eye on an old bath-house in this district," she said, leading Sonya down the district committee steps.

"A small bath-house has small boilers and you don't need so much fuel. Let's go and have a look at it. . . ."

They walked through the streets of Vasilyevsky Island; the snow was unbelievably clean and bright. It was freezing so hard that Sonya felt the breath catch in her throat.

"Did you have any tea this morning?" Antonina Trofimovna asked. "If there's nothing to eat, you always ought to drink a glass of tea or hot water when you get up, so that your inside doesn't dry up and get cold. . . ."

The bath-house was certainly not very big. It was in a very old one-storey building that stood at the corner of two side-streets about a hundred paces from the main street. The plaster was peeling off the walls, leaving the brickwork bare in many places. Until they turned the corner, however, the building appeared to be intact, but when they did, they saw that all the glass in all the front windows had been knocked out.

The door was not locked. They pushed it open and entered the hall. Large snow crystals shone like naphthalene on the clean smooth floor. It seemed even colder in here than outside—a permanent, well-established cold.

"Hullo there! Anyone at home?" Antonina Trofimovna called out.

They listened. Stillness. Only the rustle of the wind blowing through a broken window and stirring snow-flakes on the floor.

In front of them was the window of the ticket office blocked up with plywood; on the right, the door leading into the women's section; on the left, into the men's. A dark corridor led away somewhere into the distance and it was impossible to see what was at the end of it. But in the semi-darkness in a corner of the hall they made out yet another door, lower than the others, and read a notice on it: "Manager's Office." Antonina Trofimovna walked firmly up to the door and pushed it open.

As the door swung open, she recoiled. They seemed to be standing on the edge of a huge dark pit. A tiny light,

like a glowing spark, glimmered far below in the darkness. A damp warmth mingling with the unbearable sour stench of stale habitation rose up in their faces.

"Door!" A hoarse female voice shouted from below. "Shut the door!"

Taking Sonya's hand, Antonina Trofimovna stepped forward gingerly.

"There are some steps here," she said. "Mind you don't fall."

They went down the slippery wooden steps. A wick burning in a tin cast a dim pool of light on a table. Peering through the gloom, Sonya made out a large bundle of rags propped against the table. The rags seemed to move.

"Is there anybody belonging to the management here?" Antonina Trofimovna asked loudly, and her commanding voice sounded amazingly sober in this horrible, mysterious cavern.

"I am," the hoarse female voice answered.

"Who are you?"

"The manageress. . . ."

The figure of a woman in overcoat and shawl with a blanket wrapped round her emerged from the bundle of rags. An old woman, stooped like a hunchback. Her face so dark it was almost black, a sharp hooked nose, unfriendly eyes. A real witch, the kind one sees only in dreams.

"What do you want here?" she asked surlily.

"We are from the district committee," Antonina Trofimovna said.

"Ah, so you've decided to pay us a call!" the manageress said derisively, with hostility in her voice. "Well, here we are. . . . I was sent here by the district committee, too. Last September. To get things going. . . ."

"Oh yes, I remember you!" Antonina Trofimovna exclaimed. "You came to see me. . . . How old are you?"

"Twenty-four," the manageress replied. "Have I changed?"

"You have rather. . . ."

"I don't look in the mirror," the manageress said gloomily.

"But don't you remember me?" Antonina Trofimovna asked.

"Now I do, by your voice. . . ."

For a time they surveyed each other in silence. Then Antonina Trofimovna glanced round the tiny store-room that was now the management office.

"Why is it so dark in here?"

"Because the black-out's not been taken down. . . ."

"Why don't you take it down in the day-time?"

"Only got to put it up again in the evening. . . ."

"That won't do," Antonina Trofimovna said severely.

She jumped lightly on to a chair, from the chair on to the table, and removed a blue paper blind from the window. Coated with a thick layer of ice, the semi-basement window looked out into a snowdrift and only a narrow crack of daylight penetrated through the top. But even so, the whole room—two beds piled with clothes, an iron stove, a heap of coal dust thrown down in the corner—was flooded with light and the flame of the lamp became almost invisible. Antonina Trofimovna put it out and got down from the table noisily.

"Is this where you live?"

"Yes, so far."

"What do you mean, so far?"

"You know yourself. So far I'm alive, tomorrow I'll be dead."

"Why tomorrow?"

"Maybe today then. . . ."

"Have you been sleeping here for a long time?"

"Yes, a long time," the manageress replied. "I've got nothing to make a fire with at home."

"Are you all alone?"

"No, I used to have Lisaveta with me. . . ."

"What Lisaveta?"

"The senior bath attendant in the women's section. There's her bed."

"And where is she?"

"She died. The day before yesterday. I went for bread, and when I got back she was cold. I pulled her out into the women's section, into the frost. Put her on one of the benches. . . ."

"Is that where she is now?"

"Yes. . . ."

Sonya moved a little away from Lisaveta's bed. Antonina Trofimovna's face became severe and aloof. She seemed to be about to say: "Well, I've had enough of talking to you, it won't get us anywhere. Let's get down to business."

"What about the baths?"

"We kept going longer than anybody else in the city," the manageress said. "Our boilers are smaller, they don't take so much coal."

"And now what?"

"Now?" the manageress repeated.

"Don't you work at all now?"

The manageress' dark, bird-like face twitched with laughter.

"Can't you see for yourself, all the windows are broken?"

"All the windows broken, and no coal?"

"Why no coal?" the manageress said. She even sounded a little offended. "I told you there's coal here. The first thing I did when I came was to get in a stock of coal. I would have had enough coal for another six weeks or more. It's burning in my stove now. Lisaveta brought some in from the boiler-house. We had a good boiler-woman then, kept the fires in all the time. We kept going longer than anybody else, the only bath left in the city. . . ."

"And where is she now?"

"The boiler-woman? When the windows were knocked out, she went home. What was there for her to do here?

She could hardly stand as it was. Perhaps she's dead by now. . . ."

"No, we won't get any glass," Antonina Trofimovna said. "There's not a pane of glass in the whole city. But are all the windows broken?"

"There's not a window left in three classes. Women's first, men's first, and men's second. The whole front of the building."

"What about this one?" Antonina Trofimovna asked, pointing at the glass in the window of the management office.

"But that looks out into the yard. The windows into the yard are still all right. . . ."

"Have all the classes got windows on to the street?"

"No. The women's second looks out into the yard. The windows are all right there. . . ."

"Well, heat up that class," said Antonina Trofimovna.

"Only one class?"

"Yes, just one. And have it working in shifts."

The manageress laughed again.

"Well, we might get it done for next winter—if the system thaws out in spring," she said. "The whole system's frozen."

"The system?"

"The pipes, you see. The pipes are full of ice. You can't thaw them out without a welding torch."

"Well, we can get that," Antonina Trofimovna said. "Any factory will give us one. We'll just say: send us a welder and you'll have first turn in the bath."

"Are you serious?" the manageress said gruffly, but without her former hostility.

"Yes, I am," Antonina Trofimovna said. "I never dreamt you'd got any coal left. If there's coal, we'll get the rest."

The manageress became thoughtful.

"But who'll do the work? I'm the only one here now, there's no one else left. . . ."

"We'll give you people. She'll work for you," Antonina

Trofimovna said, pointing to Sonya. "How many people do you need? Ten? Fifteen? We'll give you fifteen if you like. I'll work too. . . ."

"Come on, I'll show you round!" the manageress said suddenly. "There's another class that can be heated if we board up a couple of windows. I don't know about the pipes. . . . If the boiler-woman emptied them in time, they may not be too bad."

She pulled off the blanket and threw it on the bed. She was thin and bent, and her face was dirty and wrinkled like an old woman's, but she hurried up the steps, leading Antonina Trofimovna and Sonya after her.

And so Sonya took part in restoring the bath-house. She was there every day from early morning till evening. Antonina Trofimovna actually did bring some girls to help the manageress, not fifteen, of course, only five, but that was quite a lot. They had all worked before at the spinning mill; the mill had been evacuated in the summer and for various reasons they had stayed behind. They were part of the girls' Komsomol team that had been formed at the end of the summer during the building of fortifications round Leningrad. When they had returned to the city Antonina Trofimovna had persuaded them not to disband their team and they had pitched into all kinds of jobs that were needed to help people keep alive.

They were all wrapped up from head to foot—only the tips of their noses and their chapped cheeks were showing—and they never undressed because they were never in the warm. Hunger had given them running sores on their fingers, their legs were swollen and they walked with difficulty. And yet because they were young, they were talkative, easily amused, and not even indifferent to their appearance.

"If only you'd seen me before the war!" first one of them, then another would say to Sonya.

Like Sonya, they all loved Antonina Trofimovna, and

like Sonya, they put heart and soul into restoring the bath-house.

But the work went ahead slowly. Everything was done under the eye of the manageress, who had come out of her lair and turned out to be a very masterful and business-like person. She quickly became jealous of the girls' affection for Antonina Trofimovna and tried to show them that she, not Antonina Trofimovna, was in charge of the bath-house. She even washed herself with snow, and her face was now clean but she still looked aged long before her time.

It took them two days to obtain plywood for the windows. They carried it on their backs across the frozen Neva. Then another day was spent in nailing it to the frames. At first it seemed that no one could lift the hammer, but when Antonina Trofimovna climbed on to the window-sill and nailed on the first sheet herself, no one wanted to be outdone. The manageress took the job into her own masterful hands and did the whole thing herself, allowing the girls only to pass up the nails. The boiler-woman, leaning on a mop-handle, dragged herself into the boiler-house. Her whole body was swollen from starvation, she was full of water; she breathed fast and loudly, and her eyes were scarcely visible in her dilated, puffy face. She sat down on a heap of coal and immediately had a quarrel with the manageress. Of course, she had done everything properly before she left, and had let all the water out of the pipes; now it was only a matter of turning something on and letting something else heat up, and the place would get warm and they would have hot water.

She could not walk and the girls did everything—turned on the water and threw coal into the furnace, while she sat there giving orders. She was a bad-tempered, quarrelsome woman, she scolded them all and never praised anyone, and when she got angry, waved her mop-handle so furiously that it was dangerous to get near her. The girls were given yet another duty to perform: they had to

roll cigarettes for her. She was a smoker and insisted that she could live without food but not without tobacco. To the general horror, she related that she gave up her bread ration in exchange for tobacco. But her fingers were swollen and she could not roll her own cigarettes. She would call over one of the girls and make her do it, and she would be very angry and start scolding if the cigarette was not to her liking.

But she certainly knew how to heat a boiler and in this she showed much skill, ingenuity, and caution. Caution was particularly necessary, for it only needed one burst pipe to ruin everything. She raised the temperature in the boilers fraction by fraction, listening all the time to the trickling of water in the pipes. She even slept in the boiler-house. The manageress and Sonya had carried Lisaveta's bed there for her. And on the third day the thermometer in the women's second class showed two degrees above zero.

This made the manageress terribly excited and now she felt quite sure that the bath-house would start working again. Her former weakness had vanished. She bustled about excitedly, trying to be everywhere at once, gave orders in her hoarse voice and set to work herself on any job that needed doing. She decided to scrub out the women's second class, took off her overcoat, jacket and skirt, and half-naked, lean as a gnat, set about scrubbing the stone floor. It was then, as they watched her, that Antonina Trofimovna had said to Sonya that people who did not surrender never died.

2

Finnish forces captured the neck of land between Lake Ladoga and Lake Onega and reached the north bank of the River Svir. The Germans advanced to meet them from Budogoshch village and occupied the town of Tikhvin.

A second enemy ring was formed round Leningrad, with a narrow gap, about fifteen miles broad, between Tikhvin and the southern bank of the Svir. In this gap there were neither roads nor railways.

The Soviet Information Bureau announced the fall of Tikhvin on November 30. Lunin was particularly shaken by the news. On the wall in Rassokhin's dug-out there was a map of the Leningrad Region, and by constantly examining it he had been able to gain a clear idea of what was happening. Leningrad, where so many people were still fighting, working and dying, was somehow moving farther and farther back into the enemy's rear.

Whenever he was in the air, Lunin felt drawn towards the city, just to have a glance at it, if only from above. He knew that it would take him only ten minutes to fly across the whole circle of land round Leningrad that was besieged by the Germans. But he rarely had the opportunity of flying over the city and it was not easy to discern anything from the air.

One day in December, he and Serov flew right across the city from north to south. It was a fairly bright day and the pale-blue sky was clear. But there was a frosty haze over the earth and the roofs of buildings floated in it, as if in milk. Lunin saw the long straight gullies of the streets, but what was at the bottom of them, he could not make out, although he sometimes flew almost at roof level. How he longed to see, to find out! The trams weren't running, but there were people about in the streets. No, it was certainly not a dead city! The besieged city was alive and even through the snow that had begun to fall Lunin clearly recognized the distinguishing features of its austere life: batteries of anti-aircraft guns in the broad squares, the moving turrets of the ships, now firmly locked in the ice of the Neva, the army lorries scurrying busily along the streets.

And when Serov and he flew over the southern part of the city, with its huge factories everywhere, Lunin noticed

now over one tall brick chimney, now over another, faint wisps of smoke. Those brave wisps of smoke, curling in the breeze, showed that the city was not merely bricks and mortar, but people, and that those people were working.

Lunin flew over the factories for a long time—about two minutes—impressed by the hugeness of the city, then he saw ahead of him a stretch of open country, very flat, and dusted with a fine sprinkling of snow. The front line, which had come right up to Leningrad in the south-west, fell back from the city in the south to a distance of ten or fifteen miles, and in the region of Kolpino, even as much as twenty. Lunin had studied this part well on the map, and now he immediately recognized two railway lines branching out across open country, like two splayed fingers. He saw engines and lines of trucks on the rails. Both trucks and engines were stationary, many of them were wrecked. He made out a grey strip of highway, scarcely visible in the surrounding whiteness. Three lorries, some distance apart, were creeping along it, carrying Red Army men to the front.

Far ahead of him he saw a broad low hill that lifted sparse trees above the surrounding fields. Remembering the map, he recognized it as Pulkovo Hill, and flew towards it. The famous Pulkovo observatory was on that hill. There were Germans there now, but the front was very close. Lunin decided to fly as far as the observatory.

As he watched the ground below him, he noticed black spots appearing from time to time.

He knew well what that meant. German artillery was shelling the field; when a shell burst, it threw up the earth and a black spot formed on the snow. He decided to climb and fly over Pulkovo Hill to see where the German batteries were positioned. But he had not climbed three hundred feet when his engine cut out.

There was nothing unexpected about it, his engine had often given trouble before; it had probably given Nikritin trouble, too. During six months of war Lunin's aircraft had

been knocked about and patched up so many times that Lunin could hardly understand how it managed to fly at all. On his very first flight in this plane he had been obliged to make a forced landing because of engine failure. Since then, when his engine started cutting out, he no longer attempted to land, and usually, if he waited a bit, the engine would soon pick up again. But to do that one had to have height to spare, and this time he had none. He had been flying low because he wanted to see as much as possible of the city and the surrounding country. The earth rose quickly to meet him.

It was a good thing he had not had time to cross the front. Now all he had to do was get back past the area that was being shelled. He glided carefully, hoping all the time that the engine would come to life. But the engine remained silent and there were only a few seconds to go before he must land. He lowered his undercarriage and touched down on frozen earth lightly powdered with snow.

When he had flown over this area he had never imagined it was so noisy. The air was full of a horrible whining and crashing. Almost as soon as he landed, a black fountain of smoke leapt up about seventy paces to his right and the plane was thrown sideways by blast. He must hurry. Lunin jumped out of his cockpit.

He wanted to have a look at the engine, but just then there was another crash behind him. Lunin flung himself flat. This was a fine spot to land! He got up and looked round, snorting and shaking the snow off his face. Serov, of course, had not gone away, his plane was circling round and round above Lunin. The snowy plain all round seemed to be deserted. Pulkovo Hill rose vaguely on the horizon. The city was also visible, its huge buildings rising abruptly out of the fields. Far away to one side, the three lorries that Lunin had seen from the air were creeping along like beetles.

As soon as he put his hands inside the engine, there was another sickening shriek, then a roar. Lunin ducked down.

At this rate he would never get the job done. Why the dickens were they shelling this place? There seemed to be nothing here. Perhaps they had seen him land? But they had been ploughing up the whole field even when he had been in the air. Must be a defensive barrage.

And it wasn't so deserted round here after all! On a mound of earth thrown up by a shell someone was moving. A small figure in black. At first Lunin thought it was a dog. No, it was not a dog. The figure straightened up. A boy!

Again! Lunin thought in horror, remembering the little boy Zyoza. I do have some luck! . . .

But this little boy was not at all like Zyoza. He was about twelve and he was dressed as boys are dressed in well-to-do city families. His coat was of good cloth and well made, with a fur collar; he had a leather hat with ear-flaps, and his felt boots were neat and sturdy, and trimmed with leather. Holding something that looked like a half-empty sack, the boy was watching Lunin and his aircraft with calm attention.

"What are you doing here? Get away!" Lunin shouted at him, waving his arms.

Another shell came shrieking over and Lunin crouched down. When he raised his head after the shell had burst, the boy was still standing in the same position, quite unperturbed by the explosion. Lunin began to feel foolish for crouching down.

"Go away! Go away!" And he waved his arms at the boy again.

But the boy walked calmly and unhurriedly towards the plane. He had a little frail childish face that was blue with cold, and light, determined eyes. He halted in front of the plane and rather contemptuously said: "Oh, it's an I-16."

"What are you doing here? Why are you here?" Lunin said, fiddling with the engine and glancing at the boy out of one eye.

But the boy saw no need for a reply.

"A Lagg is much better than an I-16, isn't it?" he asked

quickly. "And what about the Mig-3? They say a Mig's only good at high altitudes."

Another whine, another explosion. Lunin ducked. He felt an acute desire to crouch down. But the boy did not even duck, and merely glanced in the direction of the explosion. After that, of course, crouching down was out of the question.

"Aren't you afraid?" Lunin asked.

"No."

"Suppose you get killed?"

The boy frowned contemptuously.

"They'll never hit me."

"How do you know?"

"I'm little and the field's big," he said. "They're not aiming at targets, are they? It's only a creeping barrage."

He thought for a moment and corrected himself, as if to console Lunin.

"We are both small and the field's big."

"Where do you live?" Lunin asked.

"In town."

"How did you get here then?"

"I came for potatoes."

He walked up to Lunin and opened his sack. Lunin glanced into it and saw at the bottom something black, like lumps of earth.

"What have you got there?"

"Potatoes. This used to be a potato field. But it was never dug, everything was left in. Now, when a shell bursts, it turns up the earth and throws the potatoes out on top."

"So you come here because they're shelling?"

"You can't get the potatoes out of the snow otherwise. The earth's frozen. It's like iron."

Another shell screamed overhead and exploded, but this time Lunin did not even quiver or move away from the engine for an instant—after all, it was a big field and he was small....

"What's your name?" he asked the boy.

"Slava."

"Slava?"

"Rostislav Vsevolodovich Bystrov."

"Have you got a father?"

"He's at the front. Not here though, a long way away."

"And mother?"

"Mummy didn't come back."

"Didn't come back?"

"She went to dig trenches and never came back."

"Who do you live with?"

"Grandad."

"Is it Grandad who sends you here for potatoes?"

"No. He doesn't know where I get them."

Lunin snatched the sack from the boy's hands and climbed into his cabin. In the cabin he pulled out all his iron rations—chocolate, tinned meat, biscuits—and without unsealing them pushed them into the sack. Then he threw the sack out into the snow.

The engine burst into a roar. The propeller whirred round, whipping up the snow.

"Out of the way!" he shouted to the boy at the top of his voice.

The plane swept forward and took off. Turning round, Lunin saw the boy standing with the sack in his hand, looking after him. A tiny black figure in the snow. Yes, after the war I'll find a little boy like that and adopt him, Lunin thought. We'll live together and we won't need anybody else. . . .

Serov joined up with him in the air and they flew back to the station.

3

While I am alive there is no death. When death comes, I shall be no more. Death and I shall never meet.

Ilya Yakovlevich would think thus of his own death and toss his little head proudly.

He had always been proud and held himself in high esteem. In his youth he had been delicate and sickly in appearance, a constant prick to his vanity. That was why he had been so anxious to take part in the hardest expeditions. In those distant years the rivers of the Russian North, the rivers of Siberia, had scarcely been studied at all. He had been weaker than anyone, but far from lagging behind, he had outstripped even the strongest. There was no country in the world in whose history rivers had been of such importance as that of Russia. Yes, rivers had served Russia well in the past, but they would serve her even better in the future, there could be no doubt of that.... He was grateful to fate that he had travelled so much in his youth, that he had seen everything with his own eyes. He had accumulated such a huge number of observations, measurements, notes, figures, that afterwards, when the time came for drawing general conclusions, he felt absolutely at ease.

In those far-off years—during the winter, of course—he had also lived in this city, in this same house, in this same flat. His wife had died at the beginning of the First World War and he had been left alone with his daughter Katya. Katya had been fourteen then, a frail, delicate little girl, in a brown school frock with a black apron. He had not married again then, although he could have; he had not married because of Katya, and afterwards he had never regretted it. He needed no one except Katya. Who was that walking about in the other room? Not Katya! No, of course not, Katya was not back yet....

Ilya Yakovlevich felt a tickling in his nose and tears in his eyes. He pulled a handkerchief slowly out of his dressing-gown pocket and blew his nose ominously.

"Sonya!" he called.

But there was no answer. He was alone in the flat. The children kept coming and going without telling him anything. And he could not keep a watch on their activities because he often fell asleep.

The kitchen. He had been living in the kitchen, by the little iron stove, for a long time now, a very long time, two months. He worked here, his inkstand stood here, on the kitchen table. Here he had finished his monograph on Lake Ladoga. Now it was complete. And the manuscript was no longer on the table, he had taken it to the library of the Academy of Sciences. It would be safer there.... Now he had started some other work. Nothing very important though, just putting some notes in order. The monograph was finished, he had done his bit.

He had got used to this kitchen. The saucepans on the shelves gleamed faintly, very faintly, because the window was covered with a thick crust of ice. The stove had gone out and was quite cold; he must have dozed off again. But it must be very cold in here. Of late he had become almost insensitive to cold. His hands and feet had grown numb and could not feel anything. Sometimes the pen would fall out of his hand and he would not notice it. The children now, they felt the cold, specially Sonya; her fingers were swollen and covered with running sores.... Twelve ounces of bread a day for three people, and nothing else, nothing at all. Of course, he often did not eat his share and managed to slip it in with theirs, but that did not always work. Sonya had become so suspicious, she guessed what was happening, and watched, and made him eat in front of her.

How thin they both were, Sonya and Slava! Slava's neck was so thin, you could put two fingers right round it. It would have been even worse if the week before Slava had not suddenly brought in eight potatoes, with a packet of biscuits, tinned meat, and chocolate as well. He had got it all from an airman who had come down out of the sky. Not very credible, that.... But who could tell?... Was it only bad things that were credible, were all good things incredible?... After their meal, the children had slept nearly all round the clock because

they were not used to food, then they had woken up and eaten again. He had tricked Sonya nicely then. After all, she was simple as a baby, really; it was so easy to trick her. He had broken everything up, so that no one could count the pieces, then he had surreptitiously slipped some of his share into theirs. The chocolate would have made him sick anyway! Food only made him feel worse. He had crossed the borderline and there was no going back. They were Katya's children.

He again felt that tickling in his nose, and coughed to clear his throat. He mustn't let himself slide, he must go for a walk, call in at the library. Yes, just think of it, the library was still working. Twenty degrees below zero in the reading-rooms, and those women librarians, weak with hunger, were climbing ladders and carrying the most valuable volumes down into the cellar to save them from the bombing.... He must call in at the library for two reasons. First, so that they wouldn't worry about him, so they would know he was still alive. Secondly, he wanted to know if it was true that his monograph had been asked for by the Academy of Sciences and sent to Moscow by plane. Say what you like, this was a wonderful country. The enemy was hammering at the gates of Moscow and Leningrad, yet scholarship was still alive, scholarship was not forgotten, people were interested even in a new monograph about Lake Ladoga.

He started pulling on his boots. About five days ago he had been unable to get these boots on his feet, then he had discovered that his feet were swollen. He had cut the boots in several places with a razor blade, and now he could get them on. He took off his dressing-gown, wound a scarf round his neck, put on his hat, overcoat, and mittens, picked up his stick and went out, shutting the door behind him; Sonya and Slava both had their own latchkeys.

He crossed the yard by a narrow pathway between deep snowdrifts and walked out into the street. Before

calling at the library he decided to go for a walk. The path along the wall was so narrow that two people could not pass without stepping in the snow. But there were very few people about anyhow. When he reached the corner, Ilya Yakovlevich turned off and strolled towards the Neva.

On his way he saw three corpses, two that had been lying there the day before, and a fresh one. Feeling that curiosity would insult the dignity of death, Ilya Yakovlevich did not look at them. As he walked past, he slightly raised his lordly fur hat, which had served him not less than twenty-five winters.

He came out on the embankment and leaned on the stone parapet with his back to the University. There was a frosty haze over the Neva. The Admiralty and St. Isaac's on the opposite bank seemed to be floating above the ground. On the right was the yellow building of the Senate, its roof burnt out by a fire bomb; on the left, the Winter Palace. Ilya Yakovlevich had seen all this a thousand times, but for the thousand and first time he caught his breath, at the grandeur and charm of what he saw. What a city! Proud, gracious, and young. Ilya Yakovlevich felt this city was a part of him, and he was proud to have lived his life here.

Leningrad buried in these deep drifts of virgin snow, Leningrad beset by this grim fate only grew younger and more beautiful, just as it did under the gales and storm-clouds that constantly threatened it. It was not the first time Ilya Yakovlevich had seen these snowdrifts, these deserted streets. It had been like this in 1919. The city had been without food, without fuel, without light. Yudenich had cut its communications, but the city had stood firm, grim and unvanquished.

In those years, the years of revolution, Ilya Yakovlevich had not been one of the old type of intellectual who sympathized furtively with the Whites and dreamed of emigration. He had not been a Bolshevik, but he had

liked the Bolsheviks right from the start, and he had watched them with curiosity and respect. He liked their love of human thought, their faith in its power. All his life he, too, had loved human thought above all else and believed in it. Right from the start, in the days of wrecking and sabotage, he had worked with the Bolsheviks, and the Bolsheviks had known who he was, valued him, and were willing to give him everything, if only he would work.

And how he worked! Hostile critics declared that he was a mere observer, incapable of generalization. But one must observe first and generalize afterwards. When he started to generalize there were people who asserted that he was getting too far away from practice, taking too much on himself, that all his talk about rivers was a waste of time. Don't listen to them, he was told, get on with your job, what is theory today will be practice tomorrow. And when the country grew stronger and began to build hydro-power stations in accordance with Lenin's plan, everyone realized that Ilya Yakovlevich was right.

In recent years he had concentrated on Lake Ladoga, because it was a subject in which he could solve not merely one problem but a whole set of interconnected problems—problems of geology, tectonics, climate, biology, transport, and power. The biggest lake in Europe, seven thousand square miles in area. One hundred and twenty-five miles from north to south, eighty from east to west. Maximum depth, eight hundred feet; surface level sixteen feet above world oceanic level. How much energy was latent in this two hundred and forty cubic miles of bottle-green water! These were interesting calculations, of course, but even they were not the newest and most interesting feature of his monograph. The Russians were a northern people and half of their life was spent amid ice; they must know all about ice, both for peace and war. Ilya Yakovlevich considered the newest and most important chapter

of his work to be the one that dealt with data relating to the formation of ice on Lake Ladoga. Every scrap of data that existed about its freezing cycle since the days of ancient Novgorod. The thickness of ice coverage, gaps in the ice, movement of ice-floes, durability, cracks, ridging....

The Neva, the Admiralty, and St. Isaac's swayed before Ilya Yakovlevich's eyes and he was afraid he would go to sleep. That had often happened to him lately; he would suddenly drop off to sleep. But he mustn't get to sleep here, in the street! He would have to go to the library tomorrow. He tossed his head, turned round and walked towards home.

Getting home proved to be very difficult. He had not suspected he was so weak. Every three or four paces he would stop and lean on his stick with closed eyes. But the fear of falling asleep in the street forced him on. Another four paces. But did it matter whether it was here or at home? No, he must go on. People who don't surrender never die, as Sonya said. Think of that, eh? An interesting thought. A thought born in this city, in this country. A formula for immortality. The city of the immortal. Try and defeat people who are certain of their immortality! Yes, Ilya Yakovlevich would die, of course, but he would not surrender. Many more would die, but no one would surrender, and those who remained alive would conquer. Thought was immortal, the Motherland was immortal, Truth was immortal. No, he would get there, he would get there.

The staircase was the hardest of all. Many times his friends had told him that at his age he ought not to live on the fifth floor without a lift, but he had only laughed. He had a strong heart. But now every stair was a mountain. He took long rests on the landings. He must not go to sleep! He had said that when a man was starving he ate himself. First the fat, then the muscles, then the brain. Surely he had not started eating his brain? No, his

thoughts today had been amazingly clear, much clearer than yesterday and the day before. Today, for instance, he had realized quite clearly that Katya would never come back. Had he only realized it today? Nonsense, he had realized it long ago, he had merely been tricking Sonya into thinking she had managed to deceive him! And he had been deceiving himself. The third floor.... Another two floors to go.

He could scarcely drag one foot after the other; there was a kind of mist before his eyes. But the feeling of mental clarity did not leave him. Yes, his life was over. He had always been proud, full of self-esteem, he had always striven for something great. Well, had he lived his life badly? He had loved, he had laboured, to the best of his ability he had served reason and humanity. Had he not seen greatness in life, had he not taken part in that greatness, had he been unworthy of it? Science—that was greatness. The Revolution—that was greatness. This city—that was greatness. A tower of strength, of pride.... They died, despising those who brought them to death.

Ilya Yakovlevich could not get his key into the lock. He was out of breath and he could not see. At last the door opened of itself and somebody's warm arms embraced him and led him down the passage to the kitchen. Who was it? Katya? No, there was no Katya, it must be Sonya.... Through a mist he saw a bright flame blazing in the stove. Where did Sonya always manage to find the sticks? How warm it was here! Ilya Yakovlevich had forgotten how to feel cold, but he had not forgotten how to feel warmth. Somebody was taking off his coat, his hat, putting on his dressing-gown. No, no, he could manage. They were helping him to his chair and he was stretching out his feet in the boots he had cut open towards the fire. Now he could go to sleep. How good to sleep!

4

Kabankov was sitting under the lamp in the dug-out, writing an article about Chepelkin. He wrote carefully and for a long time, and by the time the article was finished, it was so long that it filled three issues of *Battle Sheet.*

He had been flying with Chepelkin since the very first day of the war and he simply could not get used to the idea that Chepelkin was dead. He missed Chepelkin badly. He had pulled Chepelkin's box under his own bed so that his accordion was behind it. Serov noticed it there and before they went to bed he said: "What's this, Igor, aren't you going to play any more?"

Kabankov's small face creased in a frown.

"Not for the time being," he said sharply.

Then he added ominously: "But I'll play all right when the time comes!"

After visiting the squadron, Uvarov took the article about Chepelkin to the division newspaper. The editors cut the article to about a quarter of its original size, but nevertheless printed it, and Kabankov was very pleased.

Uvarov visited the squadron quite frequently and Lunin had got to know him well. Born in Moscow, Uvarov was known on the Baltic as "the Spaniard," because he had been one of the pilots who had fought as volunteers in Spain, for the republic. In Spain he had been shell-shocked and now he was unable to fly fighter aircraft. However, he still piloted a U-2 excellently. Just before the war he had taken a course at a school for air-force political workers. He had become commissar of the division only a few days before Lunin arrived in Leningrad.

Uvarov's visits to the station were brief and he usually arrived at night. The station was a comparatively short distance from division headquarters and it was here that the commissar kept his U-2, which he used for visiting other units of the division scattered over a wide area

round the city. He always piloted the little unarmed aircraft himself and quite often carried a passenger, perhaps an instructor from the political department, or a staff officer who had to be taken to the south shore of the Gulf, or to Kronstadt, or to the shore of Lake Ladoga. Before and after making a flight, Uvarov would always spend an hour or two with Rassokhin's squadron.

He would appear out of the blue, when no one was expecting him. Lunin particularly remembered one of his nocturnal visits.

It was well past midnight and they were all asleep, when Uvarov suddenly came into the cabin. Noticing Lunin and Kabankov stir in their beds, he waved his hand at them and said: "Go to sleep, go to sleep! Take no notice of me. I just want to sit here for a bit."

Probably he had to take off at dawn and was waiting for it to get light. Although it was hot in the cabin, he kept his boots and flying suit on and merely removing his helmet sat down on the edge of Chepelkin's empty bed. He was very animated. It was the taut, brittle animation that comes after an overtiring day and makes sleep impossible.

Lunin began to doze off again, but Kabankov wanted to talk to the division commissar. It always appeared to Kabankov that he was not performing his duties as commissar as well as he should, and he hoped Uvarov would explain things to him and help him. His bed was next to Chepelkin's and he talked in a whisper, and Uvarov answered him in a whisper. Their conversation lasted until dawn. Lunin kept waking up and falling asleep, and only snatches of the conversation reached his consciousness.

Uvarov spoke of quite ordinary things. The most vital question at present, for instance, was to prevent the airfields from getting snowed up. The snow-storms showed no signs of abating, and the sailors who cleared the airfields were collapsing from hunger. They were not getting the same amount of food as the pilots. They were ex-

hausted and half-starved. They could scarcely hold their shovels, but they kept working day and night in the frost. More attention must be given to the groundstaff; the airfield cleaners, fitters, armourers, and mechanics must be made to feel that their work was valued as highly as fighting.

"War is work," Uvarov said. "I got to know that in the old days, in Spain. Fighting is work. And heroism is work."

Lunin dozed off and must have slept for some time. He was awakened by an exclamation from Kabankov:

"But what sort of commissar am I! I don't know what to do. And because I don't know, I do everything."

"I didn't know at first either," Uvarov said. "I used to do everything, too."

"Do you know now?"

"Yes, I do. That's the right way—do everything. Not everything in general, but everything for those around you. I have people all round me and I have to do everything to make things easier and better for them. The men of the air station battalion lost their sheets during the retreat—I'm trying to get them new sheets. They get low rations—I see that those rations are not stolen and are cooked well. They have lost touch with their families, so my whole office is at work helping them to find their relatives. It's a tremendously important task. I see that the dug-outs are dry and warm. Books, newspapers, writing paper, mail, that's my job, too. We were sent here by a party that serves the people, and we must serve the people. And our main task is to get everybody to understand our aims, because our aims are such that when you understand them, everything is possible. You've got to waken the joy in people, you mustn't let them get down at heart, and I explain to them that victory is certain."

"Do you know that?" Kabankov asked.

Uvarov turned and looked him in the face.

"Yes, I do," he said sternly. "How could I live otherwise? Don't you know it?"

"I know it, too," Kabankov said.

Uvarov took off at dawn, and after that night Kabankov became calmer and more confident. But he never forgot for a moment that Chepelkin had been killed. In Rassokhin's dug-out of an evening he would sit under the lamp, sketching silently. His pen would trace endless Junkers, excellently drawn from various angles, some with holes in their fuselages, some on fire, some with broken wings. There was no end of them, all damaged and mutilated, all woven into intricate patterns. And out of them were falling their Nazi pilots, all kinds of them, absurd and vile, their inhuman faces contorted with fear and pain. In this terrible design, which he would draw for hours on end, he gave expression to his longing for revenge.

In the mess he had become far more affectionate towards Hilda, to whom he used to speak sharply sometimes. Hilda had got thinner in the face lately, her porcelain cheeks were paler, two little furrows had appeared at the corners of her mouth. She had become quieter, gentler, and sadder. And if she came in with a too heavily loaded tray, Kabankov would jump up and take the plates off the tray to help her. This would make her very embarrassed, and when she went out into the kitchen, he would explain: "She's been with us so long, you know. She knew us all. . . ."

One day, while she was serving the dinner, Hilda said: "Oh, how I should love to hear some good news!"

She spoke Russian quite correctly, but in every word there was a slight accent.

"We'll hear some! And very soon, too!" Kabankov exclaimed eagerly.

He was not mistaken. On December 8, it was given out on the radio that Soviet forces had defeated the Germans at Tikhvin, liberated the town, and were pursuing the

remnants of the German divisions in the direction of Budogoshch. That was an event! The Germans had been smashed, they were running away, one of the Russian towns they had seized had been taken from them, and this had happened not just anywhere, but close by, on the adjoining Volkhov front.

Faces cleared. Everyone felt sure that this was only the beginning, that something else would happen, something big and good.

"While other people smash the Germans, we just rot in our hole like grass in a silo!" Kabankov said. "How many days it is since we flew last!"

In his impatience he could not sit still, and would pace about the dug-out, hopping and jumping.

He did not have to wait long. The snow ceased and there was a hard frost that sent the temperature down to about twenty degrees centigrade below zero. On that first clear day, German bombers launched a mass attack on Leningrad, bigger than anything since September.

What the Germans hoped to gain by this attack no one ever knew. Apparently they were simply venting their fury for the defeat at Tikhvin. Their airfields round Leningrad, almost deserted of late, suddenly became alive with aircraft, which struck at the city on four sides, in four huge armadas.

When Rassokhin got the news on the phone, the armada approaching from the south-west could already be seen from the station. As he ran out of the dug-out and saw the Junkers crawling across the sky, Kabankov laughed with joy. They ran to their aircraft along narrow paths trampled through deep snow. Kabankov was in the lead, bouncing like a ball. The frosty wind seared their faces. They took off over the dazzlingly pure-withe earth, over fir-trees loaded with snow. Kabankov flew behind Rassokhin, Serov behind Lunin. Spread out over Peterhof, the armada was heading for the mouth of the Neva. Rassokhin cut across Lakhta, to intercept the Junkers before they

reached the city. The four aircraft tore through the air at full throttle. The Marquis Pool was already frozen over and the ice lay under a carpet of snow, clean and smooth as a sheet of linen. Only in the west, near Kronstadt, were there dark gaps in the ice, with orange, sun-tinted mist hanging over them.

They flew towards the armada at right angle, climbing as they approached. And suddenly, high above him Lunin saw Messerschmitts glinting like needles in the sunlight. He had no time to count them, but there must have been about eight pairs. They were flying ahead of the Junkers and much higher. This time the Junkers were raiding with an escort of fighters.

Rassokhin had also seen the Messerschmitts and at once began to reduce height. Lunin understood his tactics immediately. If the Messerschmitts got them into a dog-fight, everything would be lost; while they were hammering each other, the Junkers would calmly bomb their target and get away. The squadron must try to get under the bombers without being noticed by the Messerschmitts, and then attack the armada from below. Surrounded by bursting ack-ack shells, the Junkers were pressing on across the coast towards the city; their bluish shadows seemed to crawl across the snow. It was a long time before the Messerschmitts spotted Rassokhin's four; when they did, they hurtled down out of the sky, like thunderbolts. But they were too late—Rassokhin and Kabankov, as well as Lunin and Serov, had already dived under the armada.

It happened over the south-west fringe of the city, over the North Wharf and the Morskoi Canal. As the black carcasses of the Junkers loomed overhead, Lunin pulled his stick back and zoomed up into the thick of them. He saw his bullets rip along the belly of a Junkers and in a flash he was above it. There was not even time to look down and see what had happened to the Junkers. Probably Serov coming up behind would finish it off. That was not

important. The important thing was to keep the Junkers away from the centre of the city, from the bridges, and from the cruiser *Kirov*, now frozen into the ice of the Neva, just by Lieutenant Schmidt Bridge. With pleasure Lunin saw the whole herd of Junkers swerving aside and breaking up into groups. And he dived down to attack them again.

They performed the same manoeuvre several times, stitching the armada with their planes from above and below. Sometimes Lunin would notice Messerschmitts near him, but would at once dart into the very thick of the Junkers, using them as a shield. Their formation broken, the Junkers were dropping their bombs on the ice and on the wasteland of the city outskirts, and slipping back singly to the south-west. Some of them were on fire, but who had done it Lunin did not know; perhaps he himself, perhaps his comrades, perhaps the ack-ack gunners, who were putting up a continuous barrage over the city.

When the armada broke up and scattered in all directions, Lunin again caught sight of the Messerschmitts. At first only two. They were coming straight at him and Serov, in a head-on attack. Lunin opened fire and forced them to turn away, but in the same instant he saw another two Messerschmitts diving on him from above. He twisted away, but the Messerschmitts hung on to him. There were only two of them against four. The worst of it was that the Messerschmitts had succeeded in splitting them up. Lunin was fighting with one pair, Serov with the other, and they were a long distance from each other.

As soon as Lunin drove off one of his attackers, the other pounced on his tail. It was a contest of manoeuvrability. Lunin flung his plane up and down, and from side to side, made the most unexpected turns, and went into spins and rolls, but they kept after him, trying to cut the corners, anticipating his turns, and not letting him get away. He needed all his twenty years' experience of aerobatics to avoid their dully glinting streams of machine-gun bullets.

Everything was in a whirl. The disc of the sun in a frosty haze shone alternately from above and below. The floating mass of St. Isaac's and the Admiralty spire, the city with its houses and streets, the broad ribbon of the Neva and the bridges over it now reared up into the sky, now sheered away down a precipice. Now the white shroud of the Gulf would rise and threaten to enclose him, now it would vanish into nowhere. Sometimes he would catch a glimpse of Serov's plane several hundred yards away, fighting with the other two Messerschmitts. Rassokhin and Kabankov he had not seen once and knew nothing about them. Perhaps they were not far away, but they must also be caught in a fight, or they would have come to his aid. He had no time to look round for them. The Messerschmitts were hanging on to him with amazing tenacity, determined to bring him down.

The minutes went past and he felt his strength ebbing under the enormous strain. As soon as he twisted away from one stream of tracers, there was another waiting for him. A roll, a side-slip, another roll, a spin, then a tight turn, and then he was going straight up. A burst point-blank into a Messerschmitt, it dodged aside, but another was already coming in behind.

Glancing down, Lunin found he could no longer see the city and the Gulf. Below him there was black forest with the white strips of the rides. Where was he? Why were they firing at him from the ground? Surely the Messerschmitts had not driven him over the front line, beyond Peterhof? His ammunition was running out. If he wasn't shot down in the next two minutes he would try to ram one of them to get it over.

And suddenly, when he was nearly exhausted, Lunin saw Kabankov's plane dart out from nowhere. Kabankov screamed down on the Messerschmitt that was hunting Lunin and set it on fire. In a cloud of black smoke, the Messerschmitt turned and bolted away to the south-west. As he roared in pursuit, Kabankov passed within a few

yards of Lunin, and Lunin saw his excited firm little face under his helmet. And at that instant he saw a stream of bullets pouring into Kabankov from behind, into his back.

Kabankov's plane lurched and plunged down, down, down, in a spin that grew tighter and tighter. At every turn it flashed in the sun. And, at last, it disappeared far below among the fir-trees, into a forest captured by the Germans.

5

Sonya usually tried to arrange things so that on the way back from the baths she would be left alone with Antonina Trofimovna. She did not always manage it, for the other girls also wanted to go with Antonina Trofimovna, but when she did, they had talks that Sonya remembered for long afterwards. It was Sonya herself who did most of the talking; Antonina Trofimovna listened, asked questions, and put in a word or two here and there. Sonya would simply tell her about everything that had particularly surprised her in the last few days.

She had been very surprised by the death of Abram the janitor. He had chopped some sticks for his wife to light the fire, put on a clean shirt, said good-bye to his wife. Then he had lain down on a bench in his room, and in half an hour he was dead. At least, that was what the women in the yard said about it, and in their stories Sonya had sensed a feeling of respect for the calm, dignified way in which he had died. When Sonya entered the room, Abram was no longer on the bench, but on the table, and his face was stern, dark and handsome, like the faces in an ikon. His little wife was sitting on a chair by the table and her face wore exactly the same stern expression. She was telling the visitors calmly and sanely about her husband's death, but from time to time she would address a few words of Tatar to Abram, as if he were still alive.

Antonina Trofimovna asked Sonya if she knew the people who lived in her block, and if she visited them frequently.

"I used to call on everybody," Sonya said. "But I don't go so much now. You have to take them bread, and I haven't got any. What's the use of going otherwise?"

"No, you ought to go," Antonina Trofimovna said. "No one expects you to bring them bread. Where can you get it from? Other people can't walk, but you can, so you go and see them. People mustn't think they have been forgotten . . . ."

Antonina Trofimovna made all her girls visit their neighbours. Back in the days when they had been fitting out the air-raid shelter, Sonya had got to know all the people who lived in her block. Now, if she failed to see someone in the yard for a long time, she would feel worried and would go and see them.

She went from staircase to staircase, from floor to floor. It was no longer necessary to ring the bell. That was a custom of the past. Nobody locked their door now, people had ceased to value their property. Sonya would walk through icy entrance halls and passages, through dark, empty, echoing rooms, until she reached the farthest corner of the flat, where life was still going on. The occupants of the flats—there were far less of them now—usually lived together in one room or the kitchen, so that they needed only one fire. Sonya would find them all in their one room, with only a wick in a jar to give them light, feeding with bits of furniture and wood blocks from the floor their ever-hungry hot iron idol with its bent pipe leading out of the window. Those who, like Sonya, could still walk, went on working. With their last meagre supplies of fuel the factories where they worked repaired tanks and lorries and forged munitions. People worked till they lost ability to walk. And in every flat there were people who could no longer get up. They were all in a very grave condition, yet they still laughed when

they heard something amusing, mourned the death of their near ones, rejoiced on receiving a letter from the front, shared their crumbs of food with each other, read the newspapers, listened to the radio, traced out the front line on their maps, argued, thought, loved their near ones, and hated the enemy. On this borderline of death, their interest in life remained as acute as ever. They were always glad to see Sonya, because they themselves no longer went out visiting and, lying in their beds for weeks on end, saw no one but the people in their own flat. Sonya would come and read them letters, listen to their dreams, look at photographs, and do what she could to help them—sweep the floor, make up the fire, carry out the rubbish.

And added to this she had many worries of her own. She had to look after Slava, Grandad.... Yes, Grandad. Taken up with her work at the baths, she had not seen much of Grandad lately and not thought about him enough. Now she reproached herself for it. He had changed very much of late, he had become silent and was always dozing. But he still persisted in going to the library. Suppose something happened to him in the street? She must not let him out by himself any more. She would go out with him. It would be a good idea to take him and Slava to the baths tomorrow.

The baths were nearly ready to start! The temperature in two classes had risen to fifteen degrees and in the taps there was hot water—not quite hot, but warm. The manageress had plugged in loudspeakers in all the rooms and the radio boomed continuously. It had been decided that the baths should be opened on the following day. Antonina Trofimovna had suggested that those who had brought the bath-house back into use should reward themselves by taking first wash.

They undressed in the washing-room itself, because the dressing-room was still too cold. There was Antonina Trofimovna, the manageress, and all the girls; only the boiler-woman, who never left the boilers, was absent. They

were excited by their victory and took a delight in the warmth, the clean basins, the water, but their spirits fell when they looked at one another undressed. How terribly thin they were! The manageress and the girls had every rib showing. And Antonina Trofimovna's body was swollen and puffy, like the boiler-woman's face. They fell silent, averting their eyes from one another.

Nevertheless it was pleasant to wash in a bath-house which they had restored with their own hands; the feeling of warmth, of cleanliness, of victory gave them new heart and as they got dressed, clothing their wasted bodies with slips, skirts, warm trousers, coats, shawls, and felt boots, they recovered their high spirits. The baths would open tomorrow, first thing in the morning, and they talked of how to avoid creating queues, and how to deal with the applications from factories and house managements.

They were nearly dressed, when suddenly the music that had been pouring out of the loudspeaker broke off. They stopped talking and listened, expecting an air-raid warning. Then a voice came on saying that there would now be a special announcement.

And thus they heard of the defeat of the Germans round Moscow.

Moscow! Moscow was saved! The enemy forces attacking Moscow had been smashed and routed!

Holding their breath, they listened to the announcer reading the names of the liberated towns of the Moscow Region, names so dear to every Russian. Then followed a list of the defeated German divisions. Then there were figures: so many guns had been captured, so many tanks, aircraft, lorries. And then the reassuring final words: "Our forces are continuing their advance."

The manageress embraced Antonina Trofimovna and kissed her on the lips. And all the girls hugged each other and kissed, pressing their wet cheeks together. Moscow! . . . Moscow was saved! Tears glistened in their eyes, tears of

happiness. Suddenly they were all in a terrible hurry; everyone wanted to get home to their families, to live it all over again with them.

Had Grandad heard the news? Had Slava? Sonya remembered that when she had gone out, the radio in the flat had been switched off. Grandad was probably asleep and didn't know anything. She must wake him and tell him. Her hair was still wet, but she could not wait any longer. She pulled on her coat, wound her shawl round her head and dashed out of the bath-house.

The short winter's day was drawing to a close when she reached the fifth floor and opened the door. No, the radio was not on. And Slava had not come back yet.

"Grandad! I've got something to tell you! . . ."

Nothing had changed in the kitchen, Grandad was sitting in his armchair, his face pale and calm in the twilight. But she realized in a flash that while she had been away something terrible had happened.

"Grandad!"

He did not move.

She ran up to him and grasped his hand. It was stiff and cold.

Still holding his hand and sobbing loudly, she sank down on the floor.

6

Since the news of the Moscow victory, a new light had appeared in every face in Leningrad. Apparently nothing had changed. The ring of encirclement had not loosened, the famine was no less. But later, for example, it was definitely established that at that time there had been a distinct drop in the mortality rate. People were so affected by hope and joy.

It was the same with the men in Rassokhin's dug-out.

Now there were three of them.

They had completely abandoned their "cabin" and moved into the command-post dug-out. They did not want to separate even at night. And why should they? Small as it was, the dug-out was quite big enough for the squadron air crew. They slept there, and they did not even go to the mess very often. Hilda brought them their dinner in pans to the dug-out; every day the food grew worse.

All three of them had suffered from frost-bite during their battles with the Messerschmitts, and black shavings of skin were peeling off their cheeks and noses. Rassokhin was in a particularly bad way and the big black patches made his broad angular face with its bushy ginger eyebrows look even more ferocious.

Every evening, after a long day of suspense, they would listen to the radio giving out the names of liberated towns and villages: Rogachev, Yakhroma, Solnechnogorsk. What had Solnechnogorsk been called before the Revolution? Or hadn't there been such a town? Istra, Venyov, Stalinogorsk, Mikhailov, Yepifan. Then Verkhovye, Dubno near Tula. Then Klin. That was on the Moscow-Leningrad line, in the Moscow Region. Yasnaya Polyana. Lev Tolstoi used to live there. Kalinin. That was Kolya Serov's home town. He had been born in a village fifteen miles from Kalinin and used to go to school in the town. Had he any relatives in Kalinin? No, none of them left there now. He had had some friends there. Often it was only in these announcements of victory that they learned just how far the Germans had got. Still it did not matter how far, as long as they were getting beaten; if they were beaten, it did not matter. Round Moscow they were taking a real hiding! But here it was all quiet, nothing moving. When would things start moving here?

The only event in the life of the squadron at that time was a letter received by Serov. It was brought to the command post and the first person to lay hands on it was

Lunin. It was in a proper, "pre-war" envelope and Serov's name was written in a good hand that was obviously a woman's. It's from her, Lunin thought and felt a warm glow in his cheeks—he was so glad for Serov. While Serov opened the envelope with trembling fingers, Rassokhin watched him from his corner with the same strained intent gaze with which he usually watched the Junkers.

"No, it's not from her," Serov said hurriedly. "I can see that already."

Even by the light of the oil-lamp they could see how pale he had become. He read the brief letter, and as if unable to understand it, read it again, then again.

"Well, what's it say?" Rassokhin asked at last.

"From the headmistress of the school," Serov said and held out the letter to Rassokhin and Lunin.

It was a reply to the inquiry Kabankov had made Serov send to the school. On a neat stamped slip of paper he was informed that the Russian mistress in question had not left Leningrad with the rest of the school, and that her place of residence was at present unknown to anybody on the staff.

Serov said nothing more about the letter and they did not mention it either; they went on living as if the letter had never come. But a few days afterwards, when they were alone together, Lunin could not help asking: "Well, have you written to anybody?"

"Who should I write to?" Serov asked. And lowering his voice, he added: "What for?"

"How do you mean, what for?"

"What for?" Serov repeated. "She herself asked her neighbour to tell me she had gone away with the school, when the school was still in Leningrad."

Lunin reflected that Serov was probably right. Yet at the same time he thought that Kabankov would nevertheless have persuaded him to make some inquiry. And the expression in Serov's eyes told him that Serov, too, was thinking of Kabankov at that moment.

Everything reminded them of Kabankov, the wound was too fresh, they simply could not get used to the idea that he was no longer with them. They remembered his favourite sayings, his habits, they could still hear the sound of his voice. In their thoughts they talked to him, asked his advice, told him about everything that worried them. As for Serov, he simply refused to believe that Kabankov was no longer alive, and maintained that he must be roaming about somewhere in the Germans' rear, that any moment he would cross the front and show up at the station. Lunin did not argue, though, to tell the truth, he had little faith in such a possibility.

Every day they took off together and searched doggedly for German aircraft. They would have liked nothing better than a fight. But the air was deserted; all the German air forces had been transferred to Moscow, where the German command was desperately trying to halt the Soviet counter-offensive. Apparently the Germans now considered it unnecessary to fly over Leningrad. Why should they fight, waste petrol, risk their men and aircraft? At the station the brief dim days and endless winter nights passed uneventfully.

And yet, little by little, things were happening. There was excitement and hope in the air, and everyone sought eagerly for signs of changes which, though still vague, they all felt to be inevitable.

First there were telephone calls from the division and the regiment asking for exact information on the squadron's transport facilities. Then a mechanic from Three Squadron, stationed in Kronstadt, stopped off at the station. Frozen after his journey in an open lorry across the ice of the Gulf, he warmed himself in the command-post dug-out, drank hot tea and told them everything he knew. He had been under the fire of the German artillery in

Peterhof all the way from Kronstadt to Lisy Nos and the experience had made him very excited and talkative. From what the mechanic had to say they gathered that in a few days Three Squadron would be leaving Kronstadt. He had been summoned to the division to arrange various organizational matters connected with the forthcoming move.

"Three of your squadron left?" he asked, surveying Rassokhin, Serov, and Lunin. "We've got four, but one of them hasn't got a plane."

And a few days later, in a brief lull between two snowstorms, the C.O. of the regiment Major Proskuryakov, a huge man with a broad face, blue eyes, very white teeth, and a very loud voice, flew in to see them. He arrived in a fighter aircraft with another fighter from One Squadron escorting him. Proskuryakov's reputation dated from before the war; his fighting days had begun on the Khalkhin Gol, where he had been decorated. It was the first time Lunin had seen him. The command-post dug-out grew even smaller when Proskuryakov ducked through the doorway, and the men who leapt to attention as he entered had to flatten themselves against the wall.

The regiment commander heard Rassokhin's report, then swept him up in his huge embrace. When Lunin was introduced to him, Proskuryakov shook hands with marked respect, and his handshake was so powerful that Lunin almost writhed, although Lunin himself had fists like dumb-bells. Then Proskuryakov accompanied by Rassokhin went out to inspect the station. Lunin and Serov waited for them in the dug-out.

About forty minutes later Rassokhin came back and started changing hurriedly, putting on every scrap of warm clothing he possessed.

"Where is the regiment commander?" Lunin asked.

"Waiting for me in the lorry. We're going off to the division. I'll be back tonight."

Glancing round to make sure there was no one in the dug-out besides Lunin and Serov, he added quietly: "The regiment's being transferred."

"When?" Lunin asked.

"Soon."

"With us?"

"Of course."

"Where to?"

"I don't know."

"Does Proskuryakov?"

"He may."

Left alone, Lunin and Serov started guessing where they might be moved to. Somewhere far away. Into the rear, to form a new squadron? Not very likely. If the men and aircraft were available, they could be flown out here. To some other front perhaps?

Neither of them wanted the transfer. The job here was not finished, Leningrad was still besieged and likely to remain so for some time. Here they had fought together with Kabankov and Chepelkin and Baiseitov. They felt there was something shameful in abandoning the city at this stage, even if it was not by their choice. They ought to stay here to the finish.

Rassokhin came back in the morning with the regiment commander; the regiment commander took off immediately. In spite of the sleepless night he had spent at division H.Q., Rassokhin was excited and alert. Lunin and Serov never asked him about headquarters instructions, but this time he brought the matter up himself.

"It'll be soon," he said.

"When?" Serov asked.

"The order should come through any day. We've got to get ready. The ground staff, the mechanics and fitters, will go first. Then we'll follow."

"Is it far?" Lunin asked.

"Not very," Rassokhin said. "We're navy, we can't be far from the fleet."

That was a relief. Why hadn't they thought of that before? If the fleet was in Leningrad, they could not go far from Leningrad either.

"It's quiet here now, there's nothing to do," Rassokhin said. "There are other places more important."

He lowered his ginger lashes significantly, leaned towards them and whispered: "The road."

Lunin grasped his meaning at once.

"So there is a road!" he exclaimed.

Rassokhin nodded.

"Across Ladoga?"

Rassokhin nodded again and with a triumphant gleam in his eye said: "I knew they wouldn't leave us without a road."

Rumours that a road to link Leningrad with the rest of the country was being laid across the ice of the frozen lake had reached the station a few days before. Lunin had not known whether to believe it or not. If such a road—no matter how poor—existed, the Germans' last and cruelest gamble would fail.

But he could not imagine such a road. Where would it run? How could a road be built across a lake, nearly the whole shore of which was in the hands of the Germans and the Finns? How could one defend it, when the ice was exposed on all sides and no fortifications could be built?

"That'll be our job," Rassokhin said.

He could say no more, because he knew no more himself. He was already busy with arrangements for sending off the ground staff and their equipment by lorry.

There would have been nothing special about all these arrangements had not a problem arisen that Rassokhin got unexpectedly worked up about. What should they do about Hilda?

The point was that Hilda, like the other cook-house workers, was on the permanent staff of the station and

for that reason ought to remain at the station. But, unlike the others, she had come to the station from Estonia with the squadron and she had told Rassokhin that she did not want to be separated from the squadron. One day, when she brought dinner to the command post, she burst into tears and rushed out of the dug-out, covering her face with her sleeve. And Rassokhin decided to take her with them at all costs.

"We can't do that!" he would say, just as Kabankov used to. "We've got so used to her. She remembers the whole squadron! She even knew Kuleshov!"

At first he thought it would not be difficult to take her. But he was mistaken. No one was particularly interested in keeping Hilda at the station, no one was working against him, but the trouble lay in naval regulations. Hilda was rated as a member of the station battalion and there was no official vacancy for her in the squadron. However, the more insuperable this obstacle appeared, the more vigorously Rassokhin tried to overcome it.

With frost-bite scars and freckles standing out even more prominently on his flushed face, he rang up the regiment, the division, Air Headquarters, and the C.O. of the station. Everywhere he got a sympathetic hearing and was advised to apply elsewhere, but no one would take the responsibility of deciding the question.

In the evenings he would explain to Lunin and Serov what a power of good he would do everyone by taking Hilda with the squadron. Hilda would be on the other side of Lake Ladoga, outside the Leningrad ring, and that would mean one less mouth to feed inside the ring. And here, at the station, Hilda's place would be filled by one of the starving women from Leningrad, who would then receive naval rations and be a little better fed. With such reasoning he tried to convince himself that he was doing right, and Lunin and Serov supported him because they themselves had got used to Hilda. In the end Rassokhin got into his lorry and drove off to the division

to "smoothe things out." His "smoothing out" was not successful, but apparently he had reached some decision himself for that was the last Lunin and Serov heard of the matter.

Regiment headquarters and One Squadron had already moved to the new station—the other side of Lake Ladoga. Then Three Squadron went through from Kronstadt. And at last the order arrived for their squadron to move.

Dry stinging snow was whirling over the dark airfield when the squadron ground staff packed into three lorries and started off. The lorries stopped for a minute outside the command post and Lunin went out to say good-bye. The sailors and mechanics in their sheepskins and black caps with ear-flaps tied under their chins looked all alike and Lunin could scarcely recognize them in the darkness. Rassokhin was standing by the last lorry, helping a small dark figure into the back. It was Hilda, in a black naval greatcoat, with a little suitcase in her hands. Rassokhin had decided to kidnap her.

She had already climbed into the back, when Rassokhin suddenly exclaimed: "Why aren't you wearing a sheepskin? Haven't you got one? You'll get frozen! . . ."

"It doesn't matter, Comrade Captain," she said. "Don't worry."

"Wait!" Rassokhin shouted to the driver, who was already pressing the accelerator.

He clattered down the plank path into the dug-out and reappeared a minute later with the sheepskin he usually wore when going to the division. He waited until Hilda had wrapped herself in the sheepskin, which covered her from head to foot, then waved his hand and shouted: "Off you go!"

They were to have taken off the following morning, but snow-storms delayed them that day and the day after. The following night the frost sharpened and in the morning the sun rose.

7

The sky cleared but a harsh penetrating wind still whirled clouds of fine stinging snow crystals across the airfield. The air was full of swirling silver dust. Panting from the wind, Lunin climbed into his plane and took off behind Rassokhin. For the last time he saw the familiar pattern of fir-trees round the field he had flown over so often. The white surface of the sea gleamed beyond the fir-trees, but they turned their backs on it and set course eastwards.

First they had to cross the twenty-five miles of the Karelian Isthmus. They flew in line ahead: Rassokhin, Lunin, Serov. The forest below them was shrouded in a mist of driven snow. To the south, under Lunin's starboard wing, was the Neva, scarcely visible in the swirling whiteness. Germans were there, just beyond the river. The wind carried the powdered snow so high that even at 2,000 feet snow crystals glinted in the clear air. Rassokhin did not want to go any higher for fear of missing his landmarks over unfamiliar country. The wind was blowing up vague patches of mist that looked like blobs of molten gold in the sunlight. And the hazy sun, poised low in the south-east, cast a dazzling glare in their eyes.

The Neva curved away in a broad arc southwards, dropped out of sight, then reappeared ahead of them. Soon a white expanse rose beyond the rippling edge of the snow-misted forest and began to widen rapidly.

They flew over the spot where the Neva flows out of Lake Ladoga. Right at the beginning of the river Lunin picked out a small island with something bulky on it which looked like a shapeless heap of stones powdered with snow. He suddenly realized that this was the famous Shlisselburg Fortress, which barred the Germans' path across the Neva and had been under fire from the German artillery since August. He could make nothing out among the ruins and wanted to get a closer look at them, but

Rassokhin turned sharply to the north and led them along the shore of the lake. They held this course until they sighted a low wooded headland with a tall red tower on it, sticking up like a finger out of the flurry of snow round its base. This was the Osinovets Light. They flew over it and turned east again, across the lake.

Long dishevelled locks of snow were sweeping across the lake. The wind blew even harder. The low shore was hidden from view and all round there was nothing but ice and flying snow. Lunin peered down, trying to see the road they were to defend.

And suddenly he saw it.

It was not actually the road, but a column of lorries crawling slowly across the ice from east to west, towards Leningrad. The lorries were wrapped in a haze of whirling snow. Peering down, Lunin noticed that they were moving along a line of markers bent almost flat by the wind. This was the only route connecting Leningrad with the rest of the country. There was plenty of traffic on it. Soon he noticed another convoy of lorries apparently moving eastwards, though from the air it was impossible to tell whether they were moving or had got stuck in the snow.

But soon he had to abandon his observation of the road; the other half of his mind that habitually kept watch on the sky had noted two Messerschmitts about five hundred yards above him. Rassokhin had thrown his round helmeted head back and was watching them, too. The Messerschmitts were above the road and above the squadron and it was difficult to guess their intentions. Lunin realized that this was the wrong time for the squadron to get into a fight; a fight would delay them and they would run out of fuel before they got across the lake. He felt relieved when the Messerschmitts suddenly turned southwards and disappeared.

On both sides of the road he sometimes caught sight of sailors in sheepskin coats. Must be guarding it. How

could they live here, always in the snow, the wind, and the frost, without any shelter, unable even to dig themselves into the earth? Sometimes they waved to the aircraft and he wanted to have a better look at them, but visibility was failing every minute. The sun had turned into a big lurid blob and the sky was pale; the haze thickened round them and even Rassokhin's plane that was only about a hundred yards ahead was sometimes obscured. Lunin often glanced round to scan the sky and once he thought he saw the Messerschmitts above him again. Perhaps he had imagined it. But he still had a worrying feeling that they were being watched and pursued all the time.

They had left the road; now Rassokhin was leading them a little to the north of it. Below them there was nothing but ice and swirling snow. It was only a few minutes' flight to the opposite bank and, if the visibility had been better, they could have seen it. But Lunin could see nothing except the whirling snow beneath, the lurid blob of sun above him, Serov's plane behind, and Rassokhin's plane ahead.

Suddenly four elongated dark spots showed up clearly in the sky ahead.

Four Messerschmitts!

They were flying in formation with the obvious intention of intercepting the Soviet fighters and preventing them from reaching the eastern shore of the lake.

They were little more than a thousand yards away and the decision had to be taken instantly. Any kind of evasive action was out of the question—they had not enough fuel. Rassokhin decided to attack and slip through.

They met almost head on. There followed a short skirmish in which everything depended on determination, self-confidence, piloting skill, and good marksmanship.

After thirty seconds a Messerschmitt shot down by Rassokhin crashed on the ice and a black stream of smoke mingled with the white flurries of snow.

A second Messerschmitt went into a lurching side-slip, but managed to flatten out just before it hit the ice, and limped away to the south.

The remaining two soared up into the sun and disappeared in its orange rays.

The way was clear.

But then Lunin noticed out of the tail of his eye that Rassokhin's plane was rocking strangely and losing height.

It lost height rapidly and soon plunged into the whirling snow-powder that the wind had whipped up over the ice. Lunin and Serov circled down, watching anxiously. Rassokhin's engine was not working, it must have been shot up. If only Rassokhin himself was all right! . . . If only he could make a safe landing! . . .

To glide down on to the ice without any power and in such a wind was no easy task. Almost hidden in whirling snow, Rassokhin's plane touched the ice and bounced high into the air, then it came down again and after a very short run jerked to a halt with one wing up and the other almost touching the ground.

If Rassokhin had got out of his plane and started examining the engine, Lunin would not have worried much. But Rassokhin did not stir from his cabin.

As they flew over him again and again, Lunin and Serov saw his helmeted head, and its strange immobility alarmed them. What had happened to him? He must be alive. If he had been killed, he couldn't have landed his plane.

In an effort to get a better look at Rassokhin, Lunin circled lower and lower through the whirling snow. And suddenly Rassokhin raised his head, then his arm. He looked up at Lunin and waved.

That wave could mean only one thing—continue on your course.

It was an order, but an order that they could not obey. How could they leave him there alone without even finding out what had happened to him! Lunin made a

broad circle and flew towards him again. And just as he was coming out of his turn, he saw Rassokhin climb out of the plane and make two or three steps towards the south, towards the road, which was about five miles away. And then he fell down in the snow. He fell down and started to crawl.

Lunin realized that Rassokhin was wounded. He could not walk and he would certainly get nowhere crawling. If they left him here he would be shot up by the Messerschmitts, and if he wasn't shot up, he would freeze to death in half an hour. The temperature was twenty-two degrees below zero. Something had to be done at once. Lunin skimmed over the ice, searching for a place to land.

Only then did Lunin realize why Rassokhin's plane had given such a leap on landing. There were ridges all over the ice and to land here in a wind like this would mean crashing the plane. With difficulty Lunin found a place that was more or less smooth—about two hundred yards from Rassokhin—and somehow managed to land.

Serov remained in the air, circling, to guard them.

Positioning his plane so that the wind would not turn it over, Lunin jumped out into the snow. The dry grit-like snow crystals lashed his face. Rassokhin's plane loomed in the distance and Lunin ran towards it.

Rassokhin was already about thirty paces from his plane and crawling stubbornly southwards. Lunin shouted to him, but he did not turn round; and anyhow what was the sense of shouting in such a wind. And suddenly Rassokhin raised himself, trying to get to his feet.

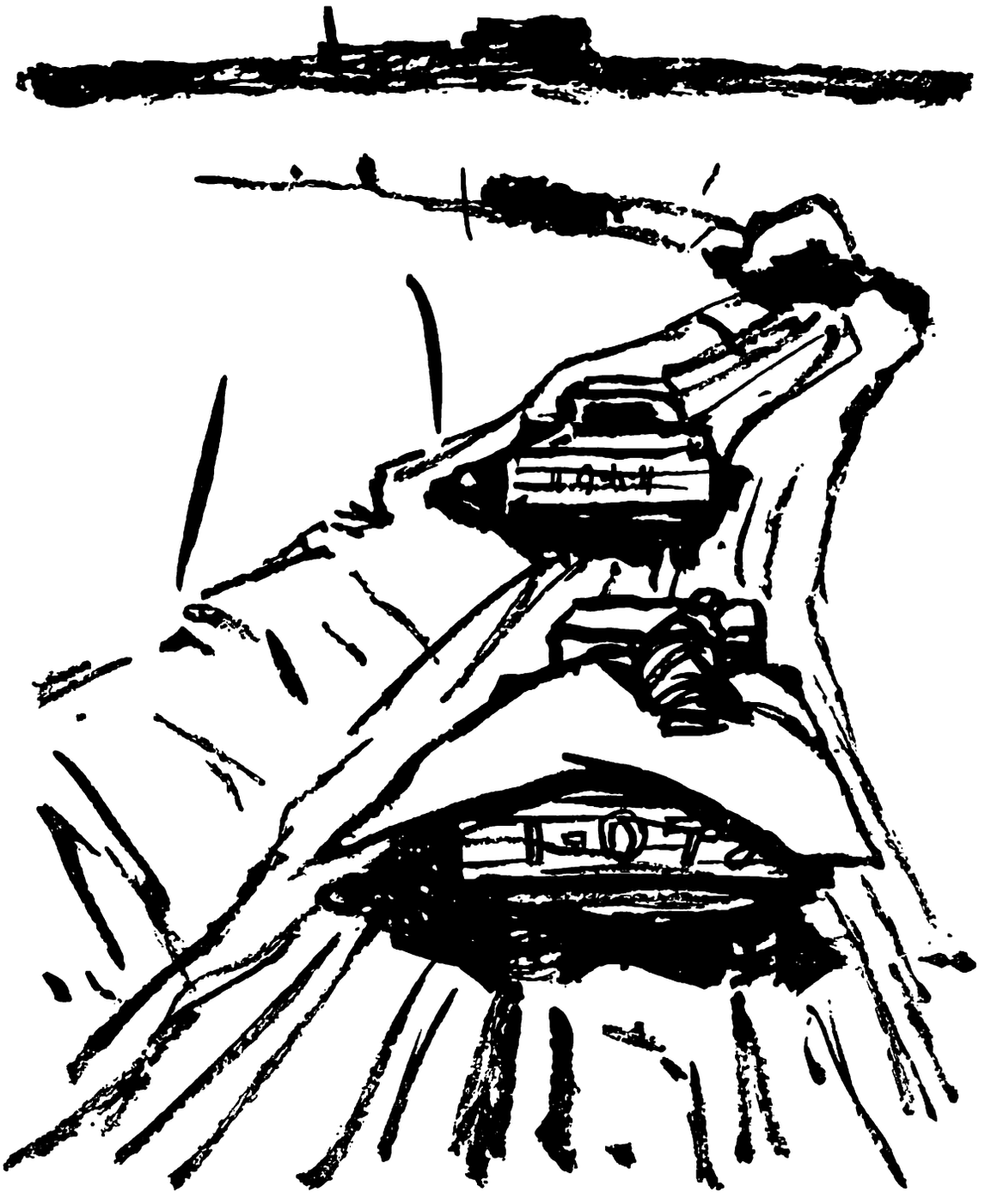
First he forced himself on to his knees. Then after a long pause, he planted his fists on the ice and rose abruptly to his full height.

For a whole minute he stood in the whirling snow, his legs strangely wide apart, broad-shouldered, rugged. Then he lifted his two clenched fists and shook them. And crashed down in the snow.

When Lunin ran up to him he was dead. He lay on the

snow, which his blood had melted and turned pink, gazing up at the sky. There were bullet holes in his chest, his big fists were clenched. Like this, with his fists clenched, Lunin carried him to his plane, which was already deep in drifting snow, wrapped him in a parachute and laid him under one of the wings.

Lunin took off. Serov joined up with him and in two minutes they saw the low shore of the lake ahead of them. It floated past below, and again there was forest, vague in the flurried whiteness. Without difficulty Lunin found his landmark—a forest ride with telegraph poles—and nosed down towards it. He wanted to go on flying endlessly, never to talk to anyone, never to tell. But already the ride was leading them to a village, to a bare white hill, to a common with a T-shaped mark for landing.



CHAPTER SIX

The Road

1

Maria Sergeyevna and her children were still alive. They still lived in the same place, in Mayakovsky Street, in the same rooms, with the same walls round them, and still the same scrape of slippers came through the door as Anna Stepanova pattered about like a mouse in the passage. And because of this lack of change in their sur-

roundings, and because their position grew worse only gradually, Maria Sergeyevna was not always clearly aware of the changes that were affecting her and her children. Even the suffering caused by hunger was absorbed by habit. The feeling of exhaustion that never left them prevented thought, veiled everything as in a fog. But it was all the more terrifying for Maria Sergeyevna in the moments when she woke up, as it were, and saw what lay ahead for her children.

The fact that the children had been left behind with her in Leningrad was a terrible misfortune, but she did not at once realize that it was a misfortune. On the contrary, for a long time she thought of it as a great happiness, a stroke of good luck. In September and October she was constantly meeting mothers who complained bitterly of being separated from their children. A large number of children had been evacuated in the summer and their mothers lived in constant anxiety because letters were slow and irregular. Maria Sergeyevna was glad the children were with her, even in spite of the bombing, which was particularly heavy at that time. While she could listen to them breathing at night and see them every minute of the day, while she could touch them, feed them, dress and undress them, and feel constantly ready to defend them in any trouble, she was almost at peace.

In the first half of autumn she was very busy. Her school had been evacuated but there was still quite a number of children in the city who had not managed to get away in the summer. The idea was to open two or three schools in each district and bring all the children together there. Maria Sergeyevna had been entrusted by the district department of education with the difficult and worrying job of organizing one of these schools. She got the classrooms ready, found teachers and textbooks, and registered the children. But the September bombing and particularly the endless air-raid warnings that kept everyone down in the cellars, made it impossible to get lessons

started, and the opening of the schools was put off from one day to the next.

In this difficult period only Irina and Sergei saved Maria Sergeyevna from thoughts that she was resisting with all her strength, from her thoughts of Serov.

Several times every day she told herself she would stop thinking about him. She assured herself that her meeting with Serov had been a chance incident that could lead to nothing, an incident so trivial that it was shameful to think about it at a time of such momentous events. But it was no use. She thought constantly of Serov, and it was not really thinking; all the time she lived with an oppressive feeling of anxiety that she could not escape. That feeling was Serov.

Ever since she had learned from Anna Stepanovna that he had called on her when she had been away digging trenches, she had waited for him to call again. Every sound at the door, every footstep on the staircase made her tremble. And yet she knew it was no use waiting. Had not Anna Stepanovna told him she had been evacuated from the city with the school.

One night she woke with a start, overwhelmed by a feeling of unbearable anxiety. What had happened? Why this spasm of grief in her heart? And suddenly an absolutely clear picture came into her head—Kolya Serov had been killed.

And for the first time she felt that what she had worried about before—whether he loved her or not—was unimportant; the important thing was whether he was alive. She remembered his face, those kind, shy eyes, the strong, big hands, his round shoulders. If only he was still alive. Let him marry somebody else, love somebody else, as long as he was alive. She began to cry and cried till morning, till the children stirred in their beds. She turned her pillow over so that Irina should not notice the damp stain on it.

Most of her information about what was going on around her came from Anna Stepanovna.

Anna Stepanovna only dropped in from time to time; she was always rushing about the district. Never before in all her seventy-odd years had she lived such a full and active life os during these months. Being an old woman she had scarcely any need of sleep and for twenty hours out of twenty-four she could devote herself to her passion for seeing everything, knowing everything, taking part in everything, and talking to everybody. It was sheer delight for her to visit all the air-raid shelters in the neighbourhood, where one could talk till one dropped and learn an enormous amount of news. After every raid she flitted like a shadow round yards and staircases to see what damage had been done. She took part in every kind of duty, at gateways and on roofs, guarding her own block and others with equal zeal. Either she did not know what fear was, or else her curiosity was stronger than fear, but she was afraid of nothing. At night she would climb up on the roofs with the youngsters and the wind would tear and pluck at her wispy grey hair and try to knock her off.

The school did not open until the second half of October. It was a long way away, the trams were hardly ever running, and whenever there was an alert all pedestrians had to stand under the archways. And even at the school itself the warnings turned everything upside down and it was impossible to establish any order. Every day fewer children attended. In a few days most of the windows in the class-rooms had been blasted and even the rooms where the windows were still intact could not be heated for lack of fuel; by November it was impossible to write because the ink froze in the ink-wells. Then the pipes of the central heating system burst, a whole floor was flooded and, when it froze, it turned into an ice-rink that the boys used for sliding on. The November days were short and dark, what daylight there was lasted for

only three or four hours and there was hardly ever any electricity. All the energy of staff and pupils was used up in a constant struggle with troubles of this kind. After a month the whole school was cooped up in three little rooms with boarded windows, heated by iron braziers and lighted only by wick-lamps in jars. By this time everyone was suffering severely from starvation and it was terrible to look at the children. Obviously school was too great a drain on their strength. At the beginning of December teaching ceased.

If Maria Sergeyevna had not had Irina and Sergei to look after she would definitely have gone to the front. In the newspapers she kept reading of women snipers, scouts, anti-aircraft gunners, and nurses, and she was sure she could perform such duties no worse than they. But it was no good thinking about the front because she could not leave Irina and Sergei. The only alternative was to go and make something for the defence of the city. When the school closed down she started work at a place where they sewed warm caps for Red Army men.

This workshop was not far from her home. She went there with another teacher who knew somebody there, and was taken on at once. Maria Sergeyevna was good at sewing and fond of it and she liked the way the women in the shop threw themselves into the work and tried to make as many caps as possible. All these women had husbands at the front and they all realized how much warm headwear was needed out there in the winter. Maria Sergeyevna joined in the work gladly, and tried not to lag behind anyone, and she found herself enjoying this hard purposeful work together.

But there was no fuel to heat the room where they worked and the women's fingers cracked with the cold and became swollen and sore. The lack of light was even harder to bear. But the front needed warm headwear, production could not be stopped, and in December the management suggested to the women who had sewing-machines

at home that they should take their work home so that the others could huddle together in a cramped little room which somehow or other could be heated and provided with light. Maria Sergeyevna had a sewing-machine of her own; she took the cloth, the cotton-wool and the lining home and stopped going to the workshop.

The moment she stopped going to the workshop she was gripped with fear for the lives of her children, a fear that grew and grew, and gradually squeezed everything else out of her heart.

She sewed at night by the light of two burning wicks. The chatter of the machine drowned the sound of her children's breathing and every two or three minutes she would stop and listen. The children slept restlessly. Irina moaned and cried in her sleep. Sergei often woke up.

"Mummy!"

"Go to sleep, dear."

"Mummy, give me some bread!"

"Go to sleep, dear. The bread's asleep too."

In spite of their hunger they were always playing; they played all the time, from the moment they woke up to the moment they feel asleep. Irina was nearly four years older than Sergei and her games were not like his. But their games did not distract their minds from the thought of food, because they played at nothing but food. Irina tore pages out of her exercise books, ruled squares on them, and in each square wrote a figure. These were bread coupons. For days on end she cut out these coupons with scissors and sorted them out as if she were the girl at the baker's. Her coupons were far better than real ones—with hers you could buy bread every ten minutes and you were never refused.

Sergei acknowledged only two toys, a tin motor-lorry and a rag elephant stuffed with cotton-wool. He still pushed his rattling lorry about the floor, making a noise in his throat that was supposed to be the sound of the engine.

"Hoot! Hoot!" he shouted.

That was the sound of the horn. But his lorry never carried anything but bread—bread from the baking plant to the baker's shop. And when he got tired of carrying bread, he began feeding his elephant with toy bricks. The elephant was allowed to eat only one brick and had to keep all the rest for tomorrow. But luckily it took only a minute for tomorrow to arrive and the elephant was then allowed to eat another brick.

Near the floor, in the dark corner behind Maria Sergeyevna's bed the wall-paper had peeled off and laid bare a crumbling patch of plaster. From time to time Sergei drove his lorry into this corner and suddenly grew quiet. The hum of the engine and the hooting of the horn would stop. One day Maria Sergeyevna, surprised by the sudden silence, glanced into the corner and discovered him squatting on his heels, pulling off the plaster and putting it in his mouth. She dragged him out of the corner, fished the plaster out of his mouth with her finger, scolded and threatened him and told him not to do it. He had a cry, then went back to his lorry, but after a time again became suspiciously quiet and was once more discovered in the dark corner, nibbling bits of plaster.

Maria Sergeyevna kept only one of her two rooms heated, nevertheless the firewood she had left over from the previous year ran out in the second half of December, and the room became cold. The children never took off their little coats and felt boots and she wrapped them in woollen shawls so that only their eyes and the tips of their noses were visible. To save them from freezing Maria Sergeyevna now had to spend several hours o day collecting fuel.

She would never have found anything had it not been for Anna Stepanovna. Anna Stepanovna knew all the nearest bomb-damaged houses, she knew how to get to them and what was to be found there. They went out collecting firewood together, taking with them an axe and sledge.

Anna Stepanovna's nose had become longer, her eyes

had sunk even deeper, and her face had turned yellow. Her whole small body seemed to have dried up into a firm light shell. But she had not yet lost her quick mouse-like step and, even when dragging the sledge, could overtake Maria Sergeyevna. Along narrow paths through the snow and across untouched snow, through empty yards and knocked-out doors they would make their way to a bombed house. Usually it was dark—there were only a few hours of daylight in December—and all that could be seen were the white heaps of snow that had drifted in through the broken walls and windows, and the grey arches of sky towering strangely above the ruined walls. The silence and darkness afflicted Maria Sergeyevna, she lowered her voice and picked her way carefully, glancing over her shoulder. But Anna Stepanovna remained quite unaffected, rummaged confidently everywhere, chattered away ceaselessly and peeped into every corner.

There was plenty of wood in the bombed houses but they searched for something that was easy to carry: bits of broken furniture, window frames, floor blocks. But they were not the only people who drew on the ruined houses for their supply of firewood, and everything that was easy to carry had already been carried away. They had to struggle with heavy rafters, trying to split pieces off them with the axe. This was very tiring and every day it got more difficult. Though she was small, Maria Sergeyevna was a strong, healthy woman, who had never been seriously ill; not so long ago she had been digging trenches at the defence works for sixteen hours a day and felt none the worse for it. But now the axe seemed so heavy that after two or three blows she would collapse on the rafter, trying to get her breath. She stared in astonishment at Anna Stepanovna, who had been tapping away steadily with the axe and cut a whole sack of chips without pausing for breath once.

Maria Sergeyevna hardly ate anything now and went for several days without swallowing anything except hot water.

Her hunger tortured her, but she could imagine so clearly how the children must suffer that she did not notice her own hunger. She could not force herself to eat anything. When she came home, the children's eyes went straight to her hands to see if she had brought any bread. She could not eat the bread they needed so much.

In January Sergei forgot how to walk. She set him on his feet and he fell down. Now he sat or lay all day in bed and pushed his lorry about the blanket. Childlike, he had got used to hunger, cold and darkness and sometimes he was even cheerful and laughed. When she heard him laugh Maria Sergeyevna threw herself face downwards on the bed and sobbed. A few days later he began to get tongue-tied and could not speak clearly, and Maria Sergeyevna could not always understand what he was trying to say.

Irina still wandered about the room on her long thin legs, but she was quiet and had lost all her vitality. In the day-time she usually sat on a chair by the stove, wrapped up in a shawl, and stared fixedly at her mother. She understood much more than Sergei, and Maria Sergeyevna often thought with horror of what must be going on in her mind. She realized, for instance, that her mother was not eating, and Maria Sergeyevna had to deceive her. But her deception was not very successful, and when Maria Sergeyevna gave her and Sergei a slice of bread each and sat down at her machine, Irina came up to her mother and placed half the slice in front of her.

"Have it, Mummy."

"Thank you, dear, I'll eat it later. Let it lie there till I've finished."

Irina went back to her chair and ate her half of the slice. Then she began to stare at the half she had given her mother. The frozen lump of bread drew her like a magnet. She left her chair and went up to the table.

"Mummy, I'll just break off a little bit. . . ."

"Of course, dear."

Irina broke off a crumb, then another, and soon ate the whole piece.

Maria Sergeyevna's strength was failing visibly and rapidly. This mainly affected the collection of firewood and the room got colder and colder. There came a time when she went to the bombed house and could not even lift the axe, and Anna Stepanovna had to do all the chopping. But even Anna Stepanovna had changed very much lately. Her talk had become even more haphazard and confused and sometimes it seemed to Maria Sergeyevna that Anna Stepanovna was not quite clearly aware of what was going on around her. When they last visited the bombed house, Anna Stepanovna kept sitting down on the bricks, forgetting what they had come for, and Maria Sergeyevna had to remind her. The chips that Anna Stepanovna split off the beams got very small and it took them a long time to fill the sack. It was very cold and the frost made them sleepy. When they had filled the sack and started dragging it out of the house on their sledge, Maria Sergeyevna suddenly swayed sideways. Anna Stepanovna grabbed at her to hold her up and they both fell over. This happened all the way, until they eventually reached home utterly exhausted.

Maria Sergeyevna did not go to the bombed house for firewood any more. She realized that if she went there she would not have enough strength to get back. She could not even sew, because her hand refused to turn the handle of the machine and there were yellow spots before her eyes that prevented her from seeing. She had been burning her furniture piece by piece for a long time and now she burnt what was left. The last thing she burnt was the table. The machine had to stand on the floor. By morning the water froze and cracked the kettle.

Maria Sergeyevna realized that she was dying. Anna Stepanovna was dying too. She lay in her cold room under a heap of clothes. Maria Sergeyevna realized that they

would both die soon, but it was already clear to her that the children would die even sooner.

The children now slept all the time and only by their breathing could she tell they were still alive. She took them into her own bed so that she could warm them with her body. Had it been possible, she would have fed them with her body, as she had once fed them with her milk. But she had nothing to feed them with.

Sometimes she would fall into a trance and the memory of Kolya Serov and all her brief meetings with him floated through her mind. How long ago it all seemed! They had been the best days of her life. But when her mind cleared, she forgot about him and only listened to the breathing of her children. They were still breathing. But in an hour, two hours? Surely she would not still be alive when they stopped breathing? Surely she would not have to bear that moment of complete silence when their breathing ceased?

And knowing that the moment was near, Maria Sergeyevna suddenly got up. She staggered to the door. She could not bear to lie with them when she could do nothing to help them. Let it all happen without her. She banged the door of the flat and walked down the staircase and out into the street.

It was day-time, the snow was gleaming brightly. She made her way along beside the houses. She swayed and felt she was about to fall at any moment. She grabbed at the walls and pulled herself upright, and went on and on, trying to get as far away as possible.

2

The whole regiment was quartered in one village, and although for northern parts it was a big village (forty cottages or more) the military were in every house, and from morning to night a motley crowd in flying suits, sheepskins, and black naval greatcoats streamed up and

down the long street, past the gnarled birches round the cottage doors. Sentries were posted outside the cottages housing the various air crew and ground staff offices: air and ground headquarters, personnel department and security, sick-bay, food stores, signals company, transport company, armoury, parachute store, mobile repair units, and so on. All these offices and the men they controlled were needed to direct the air crews, to look after them and supply them with equipment, and to service their aircraft. But there were scarcely any pilots or aircraft left in the regiment. In the hastily erected shelters on the neighbouring common that had been converted into a rough airfield there stood only six aircraft: three aircraft from Three Squadron, two from One Squadron, and the aircraft that Major Proskuryakov, the regiment commander, flew himself.

In Two Squadron there were two pilots and no aircraft. Proskuryakov had decided to take advantage of the fact that as yet there were very few German aircraft over the lake, and put Two Squadron's aircraft in for complete overhaul. Two Squadron, Rassokhin's squadron, was grounded.

This grounded squadron now had a new commander—Major Lunin.

Lunin was made commander of the squadron the day after Rassokhin's funeral. To recover the body of Rassokhin and his aircraft a large expedition of aircraft mechanics and station personnel was sent out with lorries, skis, and shovels. Serov went with them as a guide. He located the place of Rassokhin's death without much difficulty, but it was not so easy to find the aircraft and Rassokhin's body. The wind had piled up so much snow that Serov could not find even the ridges that had prevented Lunin from landing near Rassokhin. The aircraft was nowhere to be seen; some of the men even began to say that perhaps the Germans from the south side of the lake or the Finns from the north had come and dragged

the aircraft away. However, they went on searching, and at last a seaman noticed the tip of a propeller sticking out of a snowdrift. They shovelled the snow away and dug out the aircraft, under the wing of which lay Rassokhin.

Late at night the expedition returned to the station, bringing with it Rassokhin and his aircraft.

The funeral was held the next day and was attended by the whole regiment. Proskuryakov ordered the grave to be dug on the summit of the bare hill that rose above the airfield. The hill was a good landmark for all aircraft returning to the station and from its bare summit one could see beyond the forests, across the broad sweep of Lake Ladoga.

But on the morning of the funeral it was snowing hard and the hill was invisible even from the village. Rassokhin was carried out of the regiment headquarters in an open red coffin. He lay just as they had all known him in life, in flying suit and boots; his stern peasant's face, with its rough skin, broad cheek-bones, and firm lips, was just the same. His ginger lashes were not quite closed and this added to the impression that he was still alive; it seemed as if at any moment he would look up with his small, shrewd blue eyes. But the big snow-flakes clustering round his eyes did not melt.

The coffin was driven to the foot of the hill in silence. Then, since the lorry could not climb the steep slope, the coffin was taken off and carried by hand. First it was carried by Proskuryakov, Commissar Yermakov, the Regiment Chief of Staff Shakhbazyan, and the pilots of Two Squadron, Lunin and Serov. The three staff officers were relieved by others, but Lunin and Serov carried on. The coffin was heavy, its edge cut into Lunin's shoulder, his feet sank into the deep snow and slipped on the sharp incline, his raised arm grew numb and frozen, but Lunin wanted it to be even harder to walk, he wanted to feel even greater pain in his arm and shoulder. He heard Serov behind him breathing heavily and was beginning to gasp

for breath himself when they at last reached the top, where the wind was far stronger.

Frozen lumps of clay on the snow. A frozen clay pit, with a fluff of snowflakes already gathering at the bottom. They set down the coffin at the edge of the grave. Everyone felt that something else should be done before they lowered it into the pit. Proskuryakov, huge and bare-headed, with snow in his hair, glanced hesitantly at Commissar Yermakov. Yermakov, a shortish stocky fellow, very sure of himself, stepped out in front and began speaking in his crisp high-pitched voice. He spoke of revenge. In the name of the whole regiment he promised Rassokhin that they would avenge him. As they listened with lowered heads, the faces of all who were present expressed a solemn oath of vengeance. Yes, revenge, revenge, Lunin was thinking. He's right, we must take revenge....

Yermakov stopped speaking, but still they did not nail down the coffin. Lunin felt they were waiting for him, the man who had been Rassokhin's closest comrade-in-arms. He must say something, but he had never been able to speak in public. What should he talk about? About revenge too? And suddenly it came to him clearly that the word "revenge" expressed far less than he felt and thought.

Half the country was under the heel of the enemy. Over there, on the other side of the lake a huge city was doomed to slow extinction. The death of Baiseitov, Chepelkin, Rassokhin.... Revenge? No, it was not a matter of revenge. No revenge would be enough. It wasn't revenge that was needed, they must change the world, they must make it fit for people to live in, instead of being killed like this. And feeling that whatever he said he would not be able to express his thoughts, Lunin bent down in silence and kissed Rassokhin's firm cold lips.

Serov did the same. Then Proskuryakov bent down over the coffin and, obscuring Rassokhin from view with his mighty back, also kissed him. Straightening up, Pros-

kuryakov signed to the seaman holding the lid of the coffin to close it.

All of a sudden a small figure in a sheepskin coat that was far too large squeezed between Lunin and Proskuryakov and ran towards the coffin. Lunin could not see the face, but he knew who it was in a flash—Hilda! The sheepskin she was wearing was the one Rassokhin had given her to save her from freezing when they crossed the lake.

She fell with her head on Rassokhin's chest, on his lifeless folded arms, and lay there for several seconds without moving. The seaman holding the coffin lid stood rigidly to attention above her. Then she straightened, turned away and, covering her face with the yellow sleeve of her coat, dashed away without a glance at anyone down the slope of the hill, through brambles and snowdrifts, until she was hidden in the falling snow.

A volley rang out and the coffin with Rassokhin's body in it was lowered into the grave.

When Lunin was summoned to the regiment command post and Proskuryakov told him he had been appointed commander of the squadron, Lunin asked: "What squadron?"

"Two Squadron, of course."

"Does it still exist?"

Proskuryakov's broad face darkened; he did not like what Lunin had said.

"A man can die, but not a squadron," he said. "Not a squadron like that! Rassokhin's dead, but Rassokhin's squadron will live on. You are alive, Serov is alive. We shall get fresh aircraft, fresh men. . . ."

"Shall we? Rassokhin kept expecting fresh aircraft and fresh men. . . ."

"And now you will expect them," said Proskuryakov, striking the table with his huge palm.

He lost his temper. He often lost his temper and the regiment was afraid of him. But Lunin simply could not be afraid of him. He had been afraid of Rassokhin, for example, but not Proskuryakov. Too kind! Lunin thought, surveying Proskuryakov's light eyes, his fleshy shapeless nose, broad forehead, soft lips. Too kind for words!

And the next minute Proskuryakov was smiling.

"I don't think the Germans have understood yet," he said with a wink at Lunin.

"What haven't they understood?" Lunin asked.

"The road, the road that's been built right under their very noses. The road across the lake. They haven't understood what that road means for them."

"How do you know they haven't?"

"I can see it. I've been keeping an eye on them. They reconnoitre it occasionally, have a bang at it with their shore batteries, send over a few Messerschmitts to shoot it up, but they don't understand what it really means. They don't realize that this road will make nonsense of their siege. It's just a bit too rash an undertaking for them—a road across the ice. They can't believe it. But more and more lorries keep coming over and they're beginning to understand."

"Beginning to understand?"

"I think so. And soon they'll understand properly."

"And what then?"

"Then the real fighting for the road will begin," Proskuryakov said. "We'll have to mix it then, Comrade Major."

"You may have to, but I shan't," said Lunin. "I haven't got anything to mix it with."

"Now, now!" said Proskuryakov, beginning to frown again.

Every day Lunin tramped through the soft snow to the end of the long village street where he entered a big cold

barn that stood near the forest. The barn housed a MARU —a mobile aircraft repair unit. It was here that several mechanics in greasy overalls were overhauling the squadron's aircraft. The work was being done under the supervision of regiment engineer Fyodorov and mechanic Deyev.

Engineer Fyodorov was as long-limbed and bony as Deyev and according to Gromeko, the regiment medical officer, also looked like Don Quixote. That was what many people called them: "the regiment Don Quixote" and "the squadron Don Quixote." Fyodorov was even more like Don Quixote than Deyev, because he held himself very erect and wore a fair stiff wedge-shaped beard that made his face look even longer. But apart from his appearance there was nothing quixotic about him. He was a sober, restrained man of about thirty-five, with severe eyes and unhurried movements, as calm and short-spoken as Deyev. And although many people, echoing the opinion of Gromeko, called their plan of overhaul a "quixotic enterprise," it was in reality a completely serious and well thought-out idea.

The MARU's work went on nearly all round the clock, but progress was extremely slow because the aircraft were badly damaged and the unit had neither the machines nor the spare parts they needed. The MARUs had been created for minor repair work, and when it was a matter of thorough overhaul, aircraft had to be sent away to special workshops somewhere near Vologda. But Proskuryakov would not agree to sending the aircraft away from the regiment for the simple reason that he did not believe he would get them back. And so Two Squadron's aircraft were being overhauled by MARU.

Lunin, who had a good knowledge of aircraft construction, checked everything himself, discussed every detail of the work with the mechanics, rejoiced at their successes and worried over every failure. They were making two aircraft out of three. Rassokhin's plane had turned out to be beyond repair, but thanks to the spare parts it pro-

vided, there was hope of repairing the other two. Lunin would stay at the barn until dinner-time, then go back to the mess.

He tried to get his dinner over quickly, before the pilots of One and Three Squadrons returned from flying. He did not like to see their tired wind-chapped faces and he felt awkward in their presence. He had asked Proskuryakov several times to let him and Serov fly in their aircraft. If there were more pilots than aircraft some sort of rota could be arranged. His suggestion was vigorously supported by Commissar Yermakov, who thought it would be fair for all the pilots to do an equal amount of flying and have equal rest. But Proskuryakov would not hear of the idea.

"Every pilot must be responsible for his own aircraft," he said. "No pilot can answer for another man's aircraft, because it's impossible to answer for an aircraft that you don't know. One aircraft's only like another when they're both straight off the assembly line. Every aircraft that's done any fighting has its own character."

The mess was in a two-storey building, the largest in the village. Before the war it had been the village general store with the shop downstairs and offices above it. Now the mechanics ate downstairs and the pilots and members of the regiment staff on the upper floor. Lunin mounted the stained creaking wooden stairs to the mess. The big room, full of good dry heat from the stove, was lined with tables. At this hour the room was empty, except for Serov, who was usually sitting in his place waiting for Lunin. He never started his meal until Lunin arrived.

No sooner would Lunin sit down at table than a woman's voice would call out in the kitchen: "Hilda, yours are here!"

Rassokhin's kidnapping of Hilda had passed off without mishap. By a slight adjustment of the rules Proskuryakov and Yermakov had counted her in as a member of the station ground staff and made her a waitress in the air

crew mess. There were two other waitresses in the mess besides Hilda but she never allowed them to serve Lunin or Serov with anything, even a salt-cellar or a glass of water.

Hilda was still the same as usual, in the same white apron, with the same flush from the kitchen on her soft cheeks—and yet not quite the same. Lunin was aware of the change that had come over her, but could not have said exactly what it was. To him it seemed she had merely become a lot quieter—very, very quiet. She no longer appeared so strikingly pretty, although her good looks were quite unimpaired.

In these few days of enforced idleness Serov had suffered more than Lunin. When he had nothing to do, he was a prey to recollections and anxieties. A new trait had appeared in him that Lunin had never suspected—irritability.

Lunin had always thought it impossible to imagine a more patient, good-natured, even-tempered person than Serov, and suddenly it turned out that Serov was capable of starting senseless quarrels at table with people who were really completely harmless—with the regiment medical officer, for example.

Medical Officer of the Third Rank Gromeko was the most stylish person in the regiment. He went about in a flying suit, which he wore with a swagger that none of the pilots could command. His chest was hung with all kinds of little silver badges in the shape of wings, ships, and guns. He was the only man in the regiment with a moustache, which was very thin and rather impudent. Although his hair was thinning slightly in front, it was amply plain from his boyish eyes that he had not been down from college more than a year. He spoke loudly, in a deep manly voice, rolling his "r's" with gusto. He seemed always to be playing the part of the hardened veteran, the reckless, dare-devil type. It was a standing joke in the regiment that a newspaper reporter had once come to the regiment

and taken the M.O. for the regiment's ace pilot and tried to pump him about how many German aircraft he had shot down.

Gromeko also came to the mess early and usually ate with Lunin and Serov. He was always talkative and friendly, and anxious to impress. Most of his remarks he addressed to Serov; Lunin's age alone made him rather shy.

He addressed Serov familiarly and called him "lieut." Actually there was nothing to take exception to in that; men at the front easily got on familiar terms with one another and lieutenants were often called "lieuts." And of course, Serov would never have taken offence had it been somebody else and not the doctor. But coming from Gromeko, such breeziness was too much. The mere sight of Gromeko roused in him an annoyance that he could scarcely hide, but the doctor noticed nothing and went on treating him as a close and intimate acquaintance.

Everything that Gromeko talked about was soaked in a devil-may-care attitude. Spirit, pure surgical spirit, the strongest available, dominated his conversation. The possession of surgical spirit gave him a special power, put a special gloss on his reputation, and he proudly related what important personages sought his favour for the sake of his surgical spirit. On his own assurance, he could drink any amount of the stuff, and he appeared to think the ability to do so the highest of all human achievements. Besides surgical spirit, he talked a lot about his gramophone. He was the only man in the regiment to possess a gramophone, a very special gramophone of foreign make that he had acquired while the regiment had been stationed in Tallinn. Gromeko valued his gramophone so much that it was the only item of his property he had saved when the transport on which he had been evacuated from Tallinn had sunk and he had been obliged to transfer to a motor-boat. Abandoning two suitcases of luggage, he had taken only his case of surgical instruments, the

bottle of surgical spirit, and his gramophone. Unfortunately the records had gone to the bottom. And what records! The doctor smacked his lips at the thought of them. He still had three left, however, the hottest of the lot. He would call round one evening. He knew where Lunin and Serov lived—in the cottage with the forked birch-tree outside. Yes, he would make a point of bringing them some surgical spirit and the gramophone.

Lunin expressed no pleasure whatever at this suggestion, and Serov screwed up his face as if he had swallowed something bitter, but the doctor noticed nothing. All through dinner he kindly regaled them with his conversation. He also liked talking about medicine, but even about that he talked with the same dashing air and a carefully cultivated cynicism. The only side of medicine that he respected was surgery, everything else was bedpan work. Using a scalpel though—that was a real pleasure!

"Come to me and have something sliced off, friends," he would shout gutturally. It was his favourite joke.

Besides the gramophone and surgical spirit, Gromeko had another subject in which he was always ready to demonstrate his devil-may-care attitude—women. He spoke of women contemptuously and triumphantly. All of them, according to him, were extremely accessible and conquest was a matter of course. The idea never crossed his mind that any of them might be faithful to their husbands and he claimed that all the wives of men at the front lived with the service corps and the army purveyors while their husbands were away.

"So we'd better not miss our chance either, had we, lieut!" he said to Serov.

As a matter of fact, Lunin listened to the doctor without indignation. Gromeko did not disgust him; if anything, he aroused his pity. As he looked at the doctor's thin nervous face, Lunin could not help thinking of him as a boy wearing a foolish mask that he could not take off. Serov, however, made no allowances, became immediately silent

in the doctor's presence and watched him with gloomy revulsion.

He bore everything patiently, however, until the doctor put his arm round Hilda's waist. Hilda pushed him away calmly, but Serov leapt to his feet and snapped: "Let her alone!"

The doctor released Hilda immediately, turned to Serov and laughed.

"Jealous, eh?" he asked, laughing. "You know, I quite forgot she was Two Squadron's piece. After all, you brought her here, didn't you? Not to worry, lieut!"

Serov went up to him with such a terrible face that he backed away a little, bumping into a chair.

"You clown!" Serov said. "You're just a clown! Do you hear!"

"Now don't say that," said the doctor, continuing to retreat. "I can't stand for that."

Unfortunately he attempted another smile. That was too much and Serov swung back his arm.

"Serov!" Lunin said.

Serov dropped his arm immediately and turned to Lunin. He stood motionless for a second or two, then, without a word, hunched his round shoulders and walked out of the mess.

"What's wrong with him, Major? Is he a bit round the bend?" the doctor asked, sitting down next to Lunin. "What made him fly off the handle? I didn't mean him any harm, really I didn't. I'll make it up with him. I'll make it up with him today."

3

The cottage in which Lunin and Serov lived belonged to an old deaf woman, who sat muttering to herself on the ledge above the stove day and night.

The cottage was clean, without any bugs or cockroaches,

embroidered towels hung by the windows, the stove gave off a dry powerful heat, and through the windows one could see a forked birch-tree in a silver radiance of frost. Lunin's big soft bed stood behind a coloured curtain in the corner. In this bed he had passed many sleepless nights, thinking.

He thought of the war, of the men with whom he had spent the previous autumn, of the people he had known before the war. Memories crowded into his mind and he did not know how to stop their flow. He remembered much that he had intended never to remember. And all these memories roused in him a feeling of dissatisfaction with himself. There was much in his life, it seemed, that he had not done as he should have done.

Among the various happenings of the past that worried him there was also something quite recent. He had lived for over four months near Leningrad and had not even attempted to seek out his former mother-in-law. True, he had often made up his mind to go and find out about her, but had then changed his mind and put things off. And so he had left it until they moved. Now that Leningrad was out of reach Lunin kept reproaching himself for not going.

Lisa had left him several years ago and since then he had heard nothing of her. Only from her mother could he find out where she had gone, and where she was now. But he did not want to know anything about Lisa, and he had not been to see her mother, because he did not want the old woman to think he wanted to know where Lisa was.

But this old woman was the only person he knew in Leningrad. Of course, since Lisa and he were divorced, all his obligations to her mother had ceased to exist. But that had been a possible line of reasoning before the war, now it was wrong. It was his duty to find her and help her. In any case, he could call on her without asking about Lisa. And if she told him herself where Lisa was, what did it matter. Even if she said Lisa was in Leningrad.

Lunin and Serov did not go to the mess for supper. While they were not flying, they did not want to listen to the pilots talking about their day's flying, and it was impossible to avoid such talk at supper when all the pilots in the regiment came together. So Khromykh the orderly brought Lunin and Serov their supper in the cottage.

The doctor visited them just after they had finished supper. He came to make it up with Serov.

"Come on, lieut, snap out of it!" he said, standing over Serov, who was lying on his bed. "Reading a book, are you? Give it a rest, you'll read yourself to death. I'll never look at that pretty little Estonian girl from the mess again, honest to God, I won't. Why should I? Now shut your book, man, and look what I've brought."

Snowflakes were melting on his flying suit with its glittering badges; it was snowing again outside. A small oil-lamp was burning on the table by Serov's bed and the doctor's huge shadow swayed across the walls and ceiling. The doctor placed a small case on the table. When he opened it, it turned out to be a gramophone. Then from the big pocket over his left knee he produced a flask of colourless liquid.

"Hey there, Ma, go down into the cellar and bring us a cucumber each. This glass will do. Ah, there's some pickled cabbage too, is there? Pure surgical spirit! What about you, lieut, do you dilute it or not? I don't usually, but today I'll make an exception. Call over your commander. Hey, Comrade Squadron Commander, come out from behind that curtain."

Serov still disliked the doctor, but his temper had cooled long ago and he realized that it was foolish to quarrel. He now felt ashamed of his outburst in the mess.

The gramophone blared forth. Lunin enjoyed a glass of diluted spirit, but refused a second. The old woman also had a drink and her eyes softened. Hearing nothing but still enjoying herself, she sat in the corner watching Serov and the doctor. They drank a second round and a third.

They sat with their arms round each other and sang, the gramophone one thing, they another. Lunin, who had begun to doze off behind his curtain, expected the doctor to leave any minute and Serov to go to bed. But apparently they were loth to part. They went out together and took the playing gramophone with them. It was still playing as they staggered down the street, carrying it in their arms, and for a long time Lunin listened to the tune dying away in the distance.

Lunin woke up in the middle of the night when Khromykh brought Serov in. Serov was covered with snow from head to foot and completely incapable. When Khromykh let go of him he did not fall, but his eyes were closed. Khromykh undressed him and put him to bed.

"I found them near the ack-ack batteries," Khromykh explained. "It was a good job they went out there; if they had strayed about the village, the commissar would have got to know about it for a cert. They must have been making for the dug-out where the ack-ack men live, but they missed the path and got up to their waists in snow, couldn't go on or back. The doctor, he was sitting in the snow playing his gramophone, and our lieutenant here had gone to sleep."

"And how did you come to be out there, Khromykh?" Lunin asked.

"I followed them from the start. I couldn't let our lieutenant go away like that on his own. If he had been a drinking man, now, it would have been different. Drinking men don't come to any harm. But he doesn't drink."

Lunin went to breakfast the next morning alone. He did not want to wake Serov. No, this could not go on. He must talk to the regiment commander, make Proskuryakov give him and Serov some job to do. Sweeping snow off the airfield, if there was nothing else. Idleness took the heart out of a man and would lead to no good.

The snow-storm had spent itself, the morning was calm and grey, and light snow was falling. As Lunin strolled

slowly down the street, a familiar clattering noise reached his ears. A U-2 was approaching the village. Lunin looked up and saw it creep out over the forest and chug low over the cottage roofs towards the airfield. Not from Leningrad surely, Lunin thought. Without any escort, alone. Not much fun if you met a Messerschmitt over the lake in an unarmed dawdler like that.... He remembered that Uvarov flew a U-2. Could it be Uvarov?

Lunin entered the porch, cleaned his boots with a bunch of fir branches, and went up to the mess. At breakfast he usually met Proskuryakov and Yermakov, but this time the mess was quite empty. To his surprise he discovered that he was to have breakfast alone.

Hilda came out to serve him.

"No one's had any breakfast yet," she said. "The division commissar's arrived and they've all gone to the airfield to meet him."

Lunin had always enjoyed meeting Uvarov, whom he found very interesting. He had been accustomed to meeting him in Rassokhin's dug-out or in the pilot's cabin in the presence of two or three very close acquaintances and had talked to him quite simply, almost as an equal, without any ceremony. But here it was a different matter; this was a regiment and this regiment was being visited by the division commissar. Naturally, the meeting was bound to be of an official character. Here Uvarov was not a close acquaintance, but a highly placed officer; and Lunin, who had never liked to push himself forward, hastened to get his breakfast over and leave.

Uvarov's arrival rather alarmed Lunin. If Proskuryakov and Yermakov had heard anything of Serov's nocturnal wanderings, the division commissar's visit could only be for the worse. It would not have been difficult to persuade the regiment staff to take a lenient view of Serov's conduct, but in the presence of such a high-ranking officer, they might not dare to protect him.

Leaving the mess, Lunin went off as usual to see his

squadron mechanics, and from them to the MARU. After spending about an hour there, he left with Deyev who was in a hurry to get to a Komsomol meeting in the fitters' cottage.

"Serov came in to see me today," Deyev said.

"When?" Lunin asked in surprise.

"While you were having breakfast."

Deyev gave a faint grin and Lunin realized that as soon as Serov had woken up he had gone to the Party organizer and told him everything.

"What did you say to him?"

"What did I say?" Deyev asked. "Nothing. What could I say? He knows what he's done without my telling him. Just a flash in the pan, if you ask me. A chap like him won't take to drink. That's not where the trouble lies. . . ."

"Something else?" Lunin asked.

"He's restless," Deyev said. "He's got nothing to do. When you've got nothing to do, it's hard not to be restless."

They walked another ten paces in silence. Then Lunin asked: "Does Yermakov know?"

"Yes, Yermakov and I knew about it last night."

"What does he think?"

"Yermakov's hot on drunkenness. He won't stand for it."

"What's going to happen?"

"He had the doctor on the mat first thing in the morning."

"Only the doctor?"

"Yes. After all, it was the doctor who started the ball rolling. . . . Yermakov decided to give him a rocket."

"And did he?"

"He didn't have time. Uvarov arrived, so it's all in the air at the moment."

"Will they tell Uvarov?"

"I don't know."

Deyev went on with his story, but Lunin was looking

at the porch of the fitter's cottage. In the porch stood Uvarov, a smile of greeting on his face.

"Glad to see you," he said, shaking hands first with Lunin, then with Deyev. "No, come in, come in, we won't let you go away now. There's one of your fitters being accepted for the Komsomol here."

At the sight of Uvarov's cheerful, friendly face Lunin felt more cheerful himself. He had not intended to go to the Komsomol meeting, but now he gladly entered the big smoke-filled cottage. Young, weather-beaten faces surveyed them from all sides. The squadron Komsomol members—most of them fitters, and a few young mechanics—sat on all the bunks and benches.

"No, don't get up! Carry on!" Uvarov said. "Good morning to you!" And he sat down quietly in the corner with Lunin and Deyev.

In the middle of the hut stood Ivashchenko, the fitter who serviced Serov's plane, a big, broad-shouldered lad of nineteen. He was being admitted to the Komsomol and he was excited. Large drops of perspiration rolled down his flushed face. Not knowing what to do with his huge brown hands, and groping for words, he related his short and simple biography.

When he had finished, the squadron Komsomol organizer, a young mechanic, both flattered and alarmed by the division commissar's presence, asked if there were any questions. No one spoke; they all knew Ivashchenko too well and they felt there was nothing to ask him.

And then Deyev asked permission to put a question.

"How many operations has the aircraft you have been servicing carried out since the beginning of the war?" he asked.

"Two hundred and two," Ivashchenko replied.

"And how many times has it come back without carrying out its task?"

"None."

Ivashchenko replied with unconcealed pride. It was

plain to everyone that if Serov had been able to carry out two hundred and two successful operations in six months of a war like this, he must have a good fitter. And everyone realized that Deyev had asked his questions not because he did not know the number of operations, but so that the division commissar should hear it: two hundred and two operations and all of them successful. Let the division commissar see what worth-while candidates for the Komsomol they had in their squadron.

Ivashchenko was accepted and the meeting was declared closed. Lunin went out with the others into the porch.

"Walk a little way with me if you've got the time," Uvarov suggested.

They strolled together down the village street.

"I walk about here talking to people, and all the time I keep thinking of Rassokhin," Uvarov began. "As soon as I saw you, I thought of him again. I knew him well for many years, you know. We did our training together, then served in the same unit. I always respected him, but it was only last autumn that he really showed what sort of man he was. A great man, and a great fighter. Last month we recommended him for the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. The confirmation came through today, posthumously. . . ."

"It's all the same to him now," said Lunin.

"To him, yes," Uvarov agreed. "But is it to you?"

"No, it isn't," Lunin said and felt the blood rise to his cheeks.

"And it isn't to me, either," Uvarov said.

They passed the mess and went on down the street.

"And you must accept my congratulations, Major," Uvarov said.

"What on?" Lunin asked.

"You are in command of the best squadron in the regiment."

"A squadron that doesn't exist!"

"Doesn't exist? How can you say that Rassokhin's squadron no longer exists? Before the war you could say some unit or other had been disbanded and no longer existed. Every unit was the same as any other, except for its number. But now, after six months of war, every unit has its own personality, its own life. And strange though it may seem, the dead still live on in their units, they still teach and lead the living. It's surprising, but it is so. And Two Squadron is still alive and will go on living. And it's not just a matter of chance that its commander is you and not someone else. Don't you understand that?"

They had walked right through the village and the street had become a narrow forest road. Where were they going? But then Uvarov turned back and Lunin realized that they had simply been taking a walk.

"I might equally well say that I am commissar of a division that no longer exists," Uvarov continued. "We've got three regiments as well as our other units, all our headquarters, political departments, rear units, engineers, workshops, administration departments, but if we put all our aircraft in the air at once, there would not be enough to make even one complete squadron. And yet we still are a division, if only because the Germans consider us as one."

"And do they?" Lunin asked.

"They must, if after all this time they still can't make up their minds to strike at this road from the air. They are being very careful, bringing up extra forces."

"Extra forces?"

"So we've heard."

"Then they've realized the significance of the road?"

"They are beginning to. They still haven't quite understood, but they're beginning to. They'll wake up to it fully just as soon as things get a bit better in Leningrad."

"They aren't better yet?" Lunin asked.

"Not yet."

"And when will they be?"

"I don't know. How should I know? To increase rations you've got to lay in stocks of food, and the city is enormous. Besides its civilian population, it's got several armies in it, and apparently not a great deal can go through by the road. But they'll get their stocks, if we hold out. . . ."

"When will the attack come?"

"What a man he is, always wants to know when!" Uvarov exclaimed with a laugh. "The attack will start just when your aircraft comes out of repair."

"Not before?"

"I don't think so."

They fell silent and walked in silence past the mess. Uvarov glanced once or twice at Lunin out of the corner of his eye. Then he asked: "Fed up with waiting, Major?"

"Very."

"Aren't you glad to be having a rest?"

"No," Lunin said. "Rest is the worst thing for me."

Uvarov eyed him keenly, but said nothing. Then he gave a chuckle, as if he had suddenly remembered something.

"I had to reprimand the doctor," he said.

"Is that so?" Lunin said cautiously.

Now there could be no doubt that Uvarov knew everything about the night's happenings. Poor old Serov! Not daring to ask questions, he waited to see if Uvarov would say something himself. But Uvarov did not mention Serov's name.

He swung round suddenly and faced Lunin.

"Did you get a good look at this ice road when you flew over it?" he asked.

"None at all," Lunin replied. "The snow was drifting over it and we didn't follow the road all the time. We only flew across it twice."

"I didn't see anything either when I flew across this morning. Too much fog about. But we ought to have a look at it if we're going to fight over it."

"Yes, we ought."

"The best thing would be to make a trip along it and

see it from the ice," Uvarov said. "Why don't you take a trip along the road?"

It was so unexpected that Lunin did not understand at first.

"Me?"

"Yes, you, since you've got such a lot of spare time. There and back."

"Very well," Lunin said. After a moment's thought, he asked: "Shall I be able to go into Leningrad?"

"Do you know anybody there?"

"No, nobody," Lunin replied. "Well, that is. . . ."

"All right, go and see them. Go to the stores and draw travelling rations in advance. Who will you leave in charge of the squadron?"

"Serov."

"Serov?" Uvarov repeated slowly.

After last night, he won't let Serov take over, Lunin thought worriedly.

"All right, let Serov take charge," said Uvarov. "The responsibility will do him good. This is where you live, isn't it?"

Lunin turned round and saw that they were standing by the forked birch-tree. Uvarov accompanied him to the door of the cottage. Then with a brief good-bye he turned and walked away.

4

The cottage where Proskuryakov, Yermakov, and Shakhbazyan the chief of staff lived was known as regiment headquarters; the command post was a dug-out in which the duty operations officer Senior Lieutenant Tararaksin kept watch day and night. As everyone knows, there is no such appointment as duty operations officer; usually a group of officers from regiment headquarters takes the job in turns. But Senior Lieutenant Tararaksin had been born

for duty as operations officer and did the job so much better than anyone else that he had remained on duty ever since he joined the regiment. Instead of being relieved, he was "replaced" for a few hours in every twenty-four, while he slept or ate.

He was a very tall, round-shouldered fellow of about twenty-three, with a timid smile and kindly eyes. His complexion was an earthy grey, probably because he spent most of his life under the earth. Although he was the first man to learn about every air battle, for weeks on end he never saw the sky. About forty times a day he would telephone weather forecasts to various points, but all he himself knew about the weather was from the met bulletins. Probably he was round-shouldered because the low roof of the dug-out prevented him from stretching up to his full height. In a huge baggy naval greatcoat, scorched brown in many places from constant rubbing against the red-hot stove pipe, he would sit in front of six telephones, speaking into two receivers at once, and maintain contact with the squadrons, the division, Air Headquarters, all stations in the area, the fleet, and the three fronts—the Leningrad, the Volkhov, and the Karelian. He was known to thousands of people over a huge area from Kronstadt to Vologda and from the River Svir to Budogoshch village—not in person but by the sound of his voice and his name. Because he had a slight stutter, he was sometimes called Tararaksin, or even Tarararaksin. He, too, knew everybody and everything. Not a single aircraft in the region of Ladoga—Soviet or German—could take off without Tararaksin knowing about it. And not only aircraft. He knew about every journey made by every vehicle in the division. And so, when Lunin had made his preparations for the journey across the lake to Leningrad, he sat down with his luggage in the regiment command post and waited for Tararaksin to ring up and find a lorry that could pick him up.

His luggage had turned out unexpectedly heavy. Two days ago, when the regiment heard that Major Lunin was

setting out for Leningrad, all kinds of people had started bringing him bread, tins of food, bags of millet, and food concentrates.

"Here you are, Comrade Major, take this for your people. . . ."

"But I haven't got any people there. . . ."

"Never mind, give it to someone. . . ."

Lunin put all these contributions from the regiment's rations and his own four days' travelling rations in two sacks and tied them together so that he could hang one over his back and the other on his chest, and the load was so heavy that even Lunin had difficulty in heaving it on to his shoulder. He had gone to the command post in the evening. Tararaksin had told him that lorries from the rear of the division usually passed through at dawn, but he did not want to go to bed, so he dozed all night on a bench by the hot stove, with telephones jangling and Tararaksin's voice booming in his ears.

"The temperature keeps falling, Major," Tararaksin told Lunin. "The wind's shifted to the north-east and there's a clear sky. You'll find it nippy on the lake."

He was right, of course. About two hours before dawn, when Lunin went out of the dug-out to look at the stars, the cold wind stung his throat. Every star in the Milky Way was clearly visible. The snow crunched loudly underfoot and the crackling of the trees in the forest sounded like rifle-fire. Lunin went back into the dug-out and immediately fell asleep by the stove. He was awakened by Tararaksin's loud voice asking: "Well, Major, will you go in this one or will you wait for the next?"

Lunin jumped to his feet.

"In this one, of course," he said. "Is it here already? What's wrong with this one then?"

"Only that it's very heavy," Tararaksin said. "It's carrying shells."

"What does it matter, as long as I go."

He was tired of all these preparations and waiting. Heav-

ing the two heavy sacks on to his shoulder, he hurried out of the dug-out.

A cold sun had just risen above the forest and the snow was such a blaze of colour that Lunin had to screw up his eyes. A huge ZIS, its engine ticking over, stood outside the dug-out, quivering and snorting. It was loaded with wooden boxes. The radiator was swaddled in rags, sackcloth, and a tattered quilted jacket. The diminutive driver, in huge felt boots, was pacing up and down impatiently, breathing out clouds of steam and shivering. His round, very youthful face was black from frost-bite, grease, and exhaust smoke.

"Step in, Comrade Major," he said to Lunin, not very respectfully. "No, you can't put your food sacks in the back, they may get pinched. Bring 'em here, into the cab. We'll make room for them somehow."

With amused superiority he regarded the clumsy figure of Lunin in his clean white sheepskin and new felt boots, fresh from the stores. However, he lent him a ready hand in lifting the sacks and arranging them in the cab.

"No, they won't go like that," he said. "You're blocking the door. If you have to jump out, how will you get it open?"

"Jump out?" Lunin asked.

"Yes. If we get under fire. We'll put them here. Then you can jump out of that door and I'll jump out of this. . . ."

They got in and started off at once. The lorry rumbled down the village street. Motionless columns of smoke, golden in the sunlight, already hung over the cottage chimneys. The porch of the mess slipped by. They were out of the village. A narrow forest road wound between two rows of fir-trees. The lorry ran well over the well-beaten snow, raising a clattering roar in the frozen forest. But sitting in the cab was not very comfortable; the sacks gave Lunin no room to stretch his legs.

"It's a good thing it's not so comfortable," said the driver. "You won't drop off to sleep. Some drivers hang

mess-tins in their cabs to knock them on the head and keep them awake. Or they fix a rifle behind them, so that it digs into their shoulders. You always get sleepy in a frost like this. The lake's white, you can't see anything but white all round, then the frost gets you and you drop off to sleep. Talk about black magic."

"Did you see them making this road across the lake right from the start?" Lunin asked.

"Nobody here saw it right from the start. The start of it was in Moscow. I heard they wanted all the works about our lake to be brought there last autumn."

"What works?"

"Learned works. Everything that had been written about it. Crafty stuff the ice we've got here. You can't deal with it without science. They read it all up at the Central Committee and said, go ahead and build. Since then, of course, I've seen everything. It started in November, as soon as the lake got its first coat of ice. They laid a wire across the lake, put up the markers—and there was your road. Then they started sending food into Leningrad. Red Army men would harness themselves to sledges and drag them over to the other side right under the Germans' noses. They didn't make it in a day—who could!—so they'd spend the night on the bare ice. But what could you carry on sledges! . . . Anyway that's how the road started."

"And when did the lorries start?"

"Before the lorries there were horses. The roads from the railway to Kobona were bad then, but they brought up food and horses. And they started dragging food across to the other shore with horses; the ice still couldn't hold lorries. They used to send baggage trains across the ice. I saw some of those horses myself, the first time I drove across the lake. That was a risky business then, I don't mind telling you, driving a lorry across the ice. One lorry's not so bad, the trouble starts when you get a traffic jam. The ice cracks, and while they're fixing a bridge across the gap, you get about forty lorries queueing up. And sud-

denly the whole strip of ice under them starts sinking and the water comes washing round the wheels. Then the lorries with heavy loads slide sideways of their own accord towards the gap and pitch into it. And then the Germans see you and have a go! That's when you get scared. . . ."

They drove into Kobona. Above the old canal stood a church with ten or fifteen cottages round it. The church was wooden, of the old Russian type, with bulbous green cupolas. The cottages, their timbers mossy with age, were large and built in the usual North Russian style, on high platforms with a place for keeping nets, harness, and potatoes underneath. The lorry crept over the bridge across the canal and Lunin caught sight of piles of boxes and sacks covered roughly with tarpaulins and plentifully sprinkled with snow. The piles were very high, higher than the cottages, and only a little lower than the church. There was no storage accommodation in Kobona, of course, and the food supplies that had been brought here to be sent across the lake were lying for the time being in the open air. That's what the Germans will bomb when they get their air force up here, Lunin thought.

The lorry rounded a bend, climbed the last hill and Lunin saw the whole expanse of the lake, and the road running across it. The glittering whiteness of the lake was so bright that he involuntarily screwed up his eyes. He recognized the road by the line of lorries strung out along it. The lorry in which Lunin was driving coasted down the gentle slope, a barrier pole floated past above them, and they ran out on to the ice.

The road was about fifty yards in width. It had been levelled and cleared of snow, and on both sides there were walls of hard snow blocks about a metre high to protect it from snowdrifts. While the lorry had been driving through the forest, the weather had seemed still to Lunin, but here on the lake, apparently, there was always a wind, and the huge snowdrifts piled up at the sides of the road were capped with glittering spray that burst over the

walls and swept across the road in sparkling streams of feathery white powder on which a lorry's tyres could get no grip. Wherever much of this powder had gathered, there were Red Army men in sheepskins clearing it away with shovels.

There were a great number of people of all kinds looking after the road. Every one or two miles there was a traffic regulator, just like at a city cross-roads. Artillery men roamed about round their white-painted anti-aircraft guns. Sappers did repairs to the snow-block walls. Sub-machine-gunners in white overalls, crossed the road and moved across the uncleared ice towards the south. Where did all these people live, where did they sleep and eat, where did they shelter from the frost and wind? Not here, surely, on the ice?

"See the tents over there?" said the driver.

Lunin would probably not have noticed them had he not been shown. White, low, almost flat, and clogged with snow, they merged into the surrounding snowy plain. But once they had been pointed out to him, he quickly learned to spot them himself—by the brief shadows that they cast on the snow, by the paths running across the snow towards them, by the wisps of smoke above them.

"You can't make dug-outs in the ice, so that's how they do it here," said the driver.

"But where do they sleep? On the bare ice?"

"No, why on the ice? On fir branches. In every tent the whole floor's covered with fir branches. While the stove's going, it's quite warm. Sometimes it's even hot, if the wind's not too strong."

"Doesn't the stove make the ice melt under the tent?"

"That's what the fir branches are for, otherwise it would always be wet there. . . . I've spent the night in those tents often enough when I've been caught in a blizzard on the lake. There are tents out here where you can get refuelled and have repairs done to your lorry. They've thought of everything. But the best tents are the hospital ones. They

were the first on the ice, when there weren't any others at all. They were for people who got frozen trying to cross the lake on foot."

"On foot?"

"Yes, right at the beginning, when a lot of people were trying to get out of Leningrad on foot. The road was hardly marked out then, and it used to get snowed up. And the days were so short at that time of the year; it was only light for about three hours. How could they help getting lost? They'd lose their way, then lose each other wandering about, wear themselves out and lie down, and it'd be all over. The first-aid men would go out on the lake looking for them at night and bring them to the tents to get them warm. I knew a girl who used to do it. Strong as a horse she was, sometimes she'd drag in about twelve people in one night. Carry one in on her back, lay him down by the stove, and out again into the darkness and the blizzard to find another. She's still living on the ice. I met her not so long ago. Fine girl, not very tall, but so broad and strong. . . ."

Ahead of them Lunin could see all the time a lorry loaded with frozen sheep carcasses. There was no cover over them and the purple-red meat seemed amazingly bright amid the whiteness of the snow. Now the meat lorry would get about three hundred yards ahead, now it would drop back until it was quite near, and as he watched it, Lunin began to feel sleepy. The driver had long since stopped talking and was staring fixedly ahead. Lunin felt his lids stick together. He forced them open, but the next minute they stuck together again. His right leg began to feel very cold, probably because the food sacks would not let him get it into a comfortable position. He felt he ought to move the sacks and change his position, but he did not want to move and kept putting it off in spite of the discomfort.

Suddenly there was a click as the door opened and a stream of cold air burst into the cab. Lunin's head cleared

at once and he saw the driver with one hand on the steering wheel leaning out of the half-open door and looking up at the sky. Then he heard the vibrating roar of aircraft.

"Ours," said the driver, still looking up at the sky.

Lunin knew that already by the sound of the engines.

The shadows of the aircraft darted across the road. Lunin opened his door and glanced upwards. A formation of six fighters, glinting in the sun, streaked away into the frosty blue, leaving long trails of white vapour behind them. It was Proskuryakov and the whole regiment. And suddenly Lunin felt an unbearable longing to be up there, in the wind, with the others. He turned away disappointedly and slammed the door.

"Do the Germans bomb the road?" he asked.

"Of course," the driver replied. "See the hole over there?"

Lunin saw a small gap in the ice surrounded by a wooden hurdle. They had passed several hurdles like this already. He was surprised. It had seemed to him that even the small bombs dropped by Messerschmitt-110s would make much bigger craters in the ice.

"We aren't particularly scared of their bombing," said the driver. "Bombing on ice isn't anything like what it is on land. The bomb pierces the ice and goes to the bottom. See how small the hole is. Even if it bursts, there are hardly any splinters. The worst thing is when a Messerschmitt starts shooting you up with his guns. He flies over the road, looking for a place where the lorries are close together. Then he has a bash at the leader. To stop the one in front—that's what he's after. He sets it on fire or kills the driver or makes him jump out of his cab, and as soon as the front lorry stops, all the rest bunch up behind and have to stop, too. Then he can have a lovely time. Down he comes with all his guns going. The drivers scatter, but the ice is flat. Where can you take cover?"

"Yes, not much cover about here," Lunin said. "Do the Germans often shoot up our lorries?"

"They used to, but not so much now. They've got pretty scared of our fighters. It's their artillery now, they're always shelling the road. When it's clear, they can see fine what's happening on the road through their telescopes. If there's no snow-storm, you hardly ever have a calm trip, always get under fire somewhere."

"So we've been lucky today," said Lunin. "There's no snow-storm and no one shelling us."

"Don't you be so sure," the driver grunted. "We're only half-way there yet."

The meat lorry was lighter than theirs and kept trying to lengthen the distance between them, but the bridges over the cracks in the ice hindered it and they always caught it up again. These cracks in the road were rather numerous and Lunin always spotted them from a distance by the steam wreathing over the open water. It was strange to see open water in such a frost; strange that such a great layer of ice should suddenly crack. Under its covering of ice the lake was by no means calm and placid. It was as though its armour of ice were too tight, and it were trying to tear itself free. Bridges of thick rough logs had been thrown hastily across the cracks.

Lunin examined the construction of these bridges with curiosity. On one side the ends of the logs were firmly frozen into the ice, but the opposite ends lay on the other side of the crack, unattached. Evidently this was done so that the crack could expand or contract without breaking the bridge. With great care the lorries crept slowly over the rickety wooden structures above the dark steaming water.

Lunin no longer felt sleepy. His frozen feet were hurting him and he kept moving his toes and trying to change his position. Actually the discomfort was not so great; he was simply anxious to reach his destination. As usually happens with travellers who have completed half their journey, Lunin suddenly lost interest in the road and his thoughts turned to the moment of arrival. For the first

time he realized quite clearly that in a few hours something would happen to him which he had both desired and feared, that once again, after so many years, he would go up that familiar staircase, enter that familiar door, and perhaps discover, almost certainly discover, something that he both desired and feared.

And when he heard the familiar unnerving scream of a shell, he felt nothing but annoyance that the artillery fire might delay his arrival.

For all his experience, the driver showed himself far from indifferent to the shelling. His face paled and the smudges of dirt became more noticeable. "If this lorry catches a packet, they'll hear the music in Leningrad," he said with a nervous laugh. "It'll be a real concert."

Now he tried to drive as fast as possible and they raced along. The firing was not heavy and the shells whined over in a kind of lazy fashion. But the explosions were shattering, as if the whole sky were splitting apart.

"What a rumpus the blighter's making today!" the driver said hoarsely. "First on one side, then on the other. He's trying to get us in a bracket, the bastard."

The word "bracket," a technical artillery term, seemed to be full of ominous significance for him. And indeed, the explosions were coming nearer and nearer, and growing steadily louder. The driver accelerated again. Unfortunately, the road that had until then been so smooth, became rough and uneven, with ruts and ridges all the way. The lorry bucked, rattled and shook from end to end at every turn of the wheels. The shell boxes beat a muffled tattoo in the back. The lorry ahead was also going at full speed and they could see it leaping wildly over the ridges, with the sheep carcasses flopping up and down in the back.

"Caught us nicely, just on the ninth mile!" the driver said. "If we don't look out, we'll get stuck here."

"What's special about the ninth mile?" Lunin asked.

"This is where all the big cracks are. This is the worst place on the whole lake."

And when Lunin looked about him, he saw everywhere traces of the struggle against cracks in the ice and flooding water. The shaking that the lorry was enduring was due to the fact that the water which often flooded over the ice in this part had frozen into hummocks and ridges. Apparently the road had often changed its direction here. All round them there was a maze of abandoned tracks.

The shells kept falling nearer the road, but the lorry had to go quite slowly. The sheep carcasses crawled along, towering like a barrier right in front of their radiator. Lunin's driver tried to get round them, but the road ahead turned out to be jammed with crawling lorries. They were all held up by the narrow log bridges that spanned the numerous branches of a long zigzagging crack. While one lorry nosed its way cautiously over a swaying bridge, all the rest waited.

Sometimes the whole column came to a dead stop. The drivers would leave their engines running, get out of their lorries, shout to each other, stretch their legs and listen to the whine of the shells. In public, Lunin's driver put up an elaborate show of being quite unaffected by the shelling; he even yawned languidly when a shell burst quite near. Then the lorries moved on again, one after the other, slowly crossing the bridges.

Lunin had decided that the worst was over, when he noticed dense clouds of black smoke straight ahead of them.

"Direct hit!" the driver said, going pale.

A great mane of thick, greasy smoke was curling across the road, blotting out the horizon in front of them. Only oil could burn like that.

"Tanker," said the driver. "Landed a hit there!"

The lorries did not dare approach the flaming oil-tanker and the column stopped again, then one by one they left the road and, skidding in the dry snow, drove round it. It was a slow business and, while they were doing it, no less than five shells landed close by. But gradually

they got back on the road again. Now the ice was smooth and without cracks and the lorries were able to put on speed.

Either the Germans had stopped shelling or they had transferred their fire to another part of the road. Ahead Lunin could already make out a blue strip of forest that grew broader as they approached. Soon he noticed the Osinovets Light towering over the forest: this was the light he had seen when he flew over the lake. His frozen feet were aching and he drummed them on the floor, but paid little attention to them. Faster! Faster!

At last they crawled up on the lake shore and drove through quivering blue shadows cast on the snow by pine-trees. A small straggling settlement of ramshackle huts had sprung up on the shore. To his surprise Lunin heard the whistle of an engine. A goods train was standing on a branch line. As in Kobona, the snow was littered with sacks and boxes roughly covered with tarpaulins. These were food supplies that had been brought across the lake in lorries. From here it was taken by train to Finland Station in Leningrad.

It was still another twenty-five miles to Leningrad, but suddenly the driver stopped his lorry.

"Now we'll have a warm," he said.

About ten heavily loaded lorries already stood in the churned-up snow outside a makeshift wooden hut. Smoke was pouring from all its chimneys. At the thought of further delay Lunin felt impatient, but the opportunity of getting warm was too tempting.

"Not for long, though," he said, and followed the driver into the hut.

The hut was divided into two rooms by a low partition. In the big room that Lunin entered three stoves were burning fiercely. A wave of heat broke over Lunin's face and delicious warmth enclosed him on all sides. Several drivers with relaxed happy faces were standing and sitting round the stoves. Water was boiling in buckets and in big kettles

and hot steam rose to the ceiling. With great enjoyment the drivers were sipping hot water out of mugs, holding frozen bread in their grimy fingers.

"Now we'll have a snack, too," said Lunin's driver. "Take a seat, Comrade Major."

From the way he talked to the other drivers it was obvious that he knew them all well. He pulled a large smoked fish wrapped in newspaper out of a pocket in his wadded trousers.

He had just begun to clean it, when a man, probably another driver, came out of the adjoining room and said something quietly. Lunin did not hear what he said, but the drivers immediately fell silent. Then one by one they all got up and went out into the other room. Lunin's driver dropped the fish on a bench and followed them. Lunin was left alone.

The heat had made his chilled feet ache all the more. He took off his boots, wound his foot-cloths in a different way, and put the boots on again. After that, his feet felt a little better. Left to himself, he paced about round the stoves, waiting.

At length his driver came out from behind the partition and said quietly: "She's dead."

"Who?" Lunin asked.

"A woman. The captain's wife. There's a captain here from the Volkhov front. He went to Leningrad on a job and brought his wife out with him. He got her as far as the lake but she couldn't go any farther. He's been having a terrible time with her for the last two days in this hut. He fed her and did all he could, but her body wouldn't take it. She died just the same."

"Just now?"

The driver nodded. He glanced undecidedly at the fish.

"Do you want to eat, Comrade Major?" he asked. "I won't either. I never can eat on this side of the lake. As soon as I get on this side, I just can't eat. . . ."

He wrapped the fish in the newspaper and pushed it into his pocket.

"Shall we get going?"

"Yes, come on!" said Lunin and walked out of the hut.

5

They drove into the city through Rzhevka, Okhta, the Vyborg Side, past the iron and steel works and Finland Station, and crossed the Neva by Liteiny Bridge. The sun had not yet set and the huge shapes of the buildings were bathed in the ruddy glow of its last rays. Lunin gazed with an eager alertness at the snow-clad streets with their scarcely visible footpaths through the snowdrifts, and at the bare arches and gaping walls of bombed buildings. No cars, no horses, no trams, not even crows. Vaguely remembered tales of cities submerged at the bottom of the sea came into his mind. The few pedestrians he saw added to this impression—they staggered along so slowly and with such difficulty that it looked as if they were trying to walk through water.

After they had crossed Liteiny Bridge, Lunin found himself in the part of the city he knew best. When Lisa had been a girl, she had lived not far from here, in Mokhovaya Street. How many times had Lunin taken her home along these streets! And at the sight of Liteiny Bridge and the Liteiny Prospekt Lunin was quite unable to control his excitement. How often he had walked here during that summer, how often he had looked at these houses, at this long straight street stretching away in the distance! No, he had never expected to be so stirred.... The lorry was running between two high banks of snow in the direction of the Nevsky Prospekt. Lunin counted the turnings, he knew them all well. At the corner of Pestel Street he asked the driver to stop.

The driver got out of the cab with him, helped him to lift the sacks on to his shoulder and bid him a friendly good-bye. Lunin's chilled feet had grown numb from sitting so long in the cab and at first he could not walk properly. Staggering under the weight of his sacks, he made his way slowly down Pestel Street, along a narrow footpath by the wall. Most of the people he met were women, stooped and scarcely able to walk, their felt boots slit open to make room for their swollen feet, their faces muffled with shawls. He stepped timidly aside into the deep snow to let them pass. Yes, this used to be the window of a florist's. Here was the chemist's.... How he remembered that sign. His heart thumped wildly and he had to stop for a little to steady himself.

He had reached the junction of Pestel Street and Mokhovaya Street, when he saw that one of the four corner houses had been demolished by a bomb, as though sliced open by a huge knife. Every flat on each of its five floors was exposed—the rooms papered in various colours, the tables heaped with snow, the furniture, the mirrors. That one only just missed them, he thought worriedly. They used to live quite near here, in the third or fourth house from the corner. He turned the corner and at once recognized the house.

At first their house appeared to him unchanged. Six floors of gloomy dark-grey façade decorated with hardly less gloomy plaster mouldings. There was their front door. He remembered the sour dusty smell of that doorway and its rather dirty windows with their heraldic pictures in coloured glass that had once made such an impression on his provincial mind.

He took a few more paces and stopped in amazement. Why hadn't he noticed it before? All the windows were broken on every floor!

Realizing exactly what had happened, but still hoping, he hurried up to the house. No, it was just an empty box, just a façade, there was no roof and not a single rafter

on any floor—a mere empty shell. Through the gaping windows he saw a tangle of twisted broken beams.

Only now, when it was obvious that Lisa's mother was not here, did he realize how much he wanted to see her. He had been afraid to meet her, yet he had looked forward to it.... Only she could tell him something about Lisa.... On the way here, he had cherished a secret hope that Lisa might be here too, that Lisa and her mother were living together again....

Weighed down by his sacks, he stood before the ruined house and thought. Wasn't there anyone he could ask about the old woman, anyone who would tell him something about her? But who? The house must have been destroyed some time ago, back in September probably. Yes, Mokhovaya had caught a real packet! Not a window left, no matter where you looked. No one living here.... No one in the street.... How quiet it was!...

The sun had set and cold blue shadows were curling among the houses, although the sky was still bright. Lunin walked slowly back to the corner. He did not know where to go. He did not care. For once he had tried to find out something about Lisa and nothing had come of it. Now he would never know....

He walked back to Pestel Street and turned mechanically in the direction of the Fontanka River. By a narrow path through the snow he reached the embankment and stopped.

The sacks were cutting into his shoulder, but he did not notice it. Before him, on the other side of the Fontanka, were the Summer Gardens. In spite of the gathering dusk he could see anti-aircraft guns through the bare trees.

He was standing staring fixedly in front of him, when suddenly a little woman appeared round the corner and walked past him. In spite of the frost her coat was unbuttoned and her woollen shawl hung loosely over her shoulders.

He did not see her face for more than a second. It was a very thin face with taut bluish skin and pale, tightly compressed lips. But the worst thing was her eyes. There was so much pain in them that he felt a sharp wrench inside him.

She walked away from him down the embankment and he stood watching her. She seemed to be in a great hurry, as if she were anxious to get as far away from something as she could, but her black-booted legs could scarcely carry her and she staggered feebly from side to side. She tried to keep near the wall and often grabbed at it to stop herself from falling. But even so she fell down in the snow. She pulled herself up at once, took two or three paces, and fell again. And again she pulled herself up.

Unable to forget the expression in her eyes, Lunin ran after her. The weight of the sacks made him gasp for breath.

"Stop! . . . Stop! . . ."

She did not hear him and hurried on without looking back. But the distance between them quickly lessened.

"Excuse me . . ." he gasped almost in her ear.

She swayed, halted and looked straight into his face with unseeing eyes. And went on her way at once.

"Wait a minute!" he said, grasping her sleeve.

When she stopped again, he threw his sacks down in the snow and, with sudden decision, began hastily untying them, afraid that she might go away.

"You must be very hungry. . . . You haven't had anything to eat for a long time . . ." he muttered, tugging at the frozen knot with his stiff fingers.

She stood looking at him apathetically, her eyes dull with suffering.

At last the knot gave. He plunged his hands into the sack and pulled out the first thing they touched—a loaf of bread.

"Here," he said and held out the loaf.

At the sight of the bread, her face twitched, her lips

parted, and something like fear appeared in her eyes. She started back.

"Here you are.... Take it! ..."

He pushed the loaf into her hands.

"For me?" she asked incredulously.

"Of course," he said. Pity and tenderness welled up in him as he looked at her thin hands.

She looked at the loaf, then at him.

"Why for me?" she asked.

I don't need it..." he muttered hastily. "I'm only here for a day, I'll be going away again. I've got all I need."

And then he saw tears falling on the bread. Before he knew what was happening, she had dropped on her knees before him.

That was too much. In a panic he grasped her and lifted her to her feet.

"I'll give you more, more!" he said, pushing a tin of food into her coat pocket. "Eat! Why don't you eat?" He was trembling. "Eat a piece of bread, you'll feel better at once. I'll give you some more, I've got plenty."

He longed to see her eat something straightaway, in front of him. But she pushed the loaf down her coat and shook her head.

"Why?" he asked.

"The children," she said.

"Have you got children?"

She nodded.

"Many?"

"Two."

"Where are they?"

"At home."

"But where were you going?"

"I was running away.... I hadn't anything to give them...."

Lunin bent down, tied his sacks together and lifted them on to his shoulder.

"Come on," he said. "Show me where you live."

He was in a hurry and she could not keep up with him. She even tried to run. He had to wait for her because he did not know the way. When he thought she was about to fall, he would grasp her elbow. They turned into Pestel Street, walked down it as far as the Liteiny Prospekt and crossed it. It was rapidly growing dark. They followed a narrow crisp path across a deserted square with a big white church in the background looming faintly behind iron railings. They passed the church and turned right into Mayakovsky Street.

"How much farther?" Lunin asked.

"We're nearly there," she said, scarcely audibly.

Lunin thought of the children. He could stand anything, he could stand death and suffering among grown men and women, but not among children. They entered a yard. She managed to come a long way, he thought. Are they still alive? . . .

"Is this it? Higher?" he kept asking her, as they mounted the dark unfamiliar staircase.

She was too weak to answer. He stopped on a landing and waited for her. He could scarcely see her in the darkness as she struggled up the stairs, clutching the bread to her chest. At last she reached him and pushed on a door. It was not locked.

He followed her into the flat. The flat was in complete darkness, all the windows were curtained. It was no warmer than outside on the staircase. He followed her by the sound of her footsteps. They went through another door. It was no warmer here, either. He crashed into an iron stove and grazed his knee. This must be where they lived. He dropped his sacks on the floor and fumbled in his pocket for a torch.

The yellow circle of light darted round the walls and he thought the room was empty. Not a table, not a chair, not a cupboard—nothing. Where was she? He heard a

rustle and swung his torch round. She was standing by a large bed.

Two small heads wrapped in shawls lay on the pillow. She fell flat across the bed, covering the children with her body.

He stood breathlessly watching their faces. Were they alive? They were all muffled up, only their noses showing. Yet he could see that the older one was a little girl, and the other, a boy. Weren't they breathing? And suddenly the girl frowned in the light of the torch and opened her eyes.

A minute later she was sitting up and eating bread, pulling little half-frozen lumps out of the loaf with her thin bent fingers. In the corner, on the floor—there was no furniture in the room besides the bed—a wick was flickering in a jar, and the light gleamed in the girl's large eyes. The boy was alive, too, but they could not wake him up. The mother stuffed bread into his mouth but he seemed completely indifferent to it. The bread just lay in his mouth. For a few terrible seconds it seemed impossible to make him eat. Then his mouth moved.

"He's chewing! He's chewing!" Lunin shouted. "Look, he's swallowing it!"

He found some old newspapers and spread them on the floor round the light. Hurriedly he pulled everything out of his sacks and heaped it on the newspapers. Another loaf of bread, half a loaf, slices, odd pieces, rusks. Tins, tins. Smoked fish, little packets of sugar, little packets of groats.... He shook the sacks and turned them inside out, as though afraid there might be something left inside.

"Children need more than bread, they need soup, porridge," he said. "We'll make some."

Then he noticed that the woman had still not eaten anything. He got angry. He shouted at her and she sat down in fright on the edge of the bed, obediently picked up a lump of bread and started chewing it. When she had eaten, she asked: "May I take a piece to the kitchen? To an old woman there?... She's lying in the kitchen...."

"Your mother?"

"No, just an old woman. . . . May I?"

"Of course, you may! It's all yours," he said exultantly. "Do what you like with it. . . ."

She went out into the kitchen. Looking round, he saw an axe leaning against a sewing-machine. Now the thing was to make the room warm. He grasped the axe and, shining his torch in front of him, walked out of the flat. He did not know where he would find wood, but he had no doubt that he would find some. He felt an overwhelming need to work, to do everything he possibly could for this woman and her children. To feed them, to warm them, to make them live was the greatest happiness that could befall a man.

That night he did not want to sleep and he sat on the floor by the stove with his knees tucked up under his chin. The whole room was full of a blissful heat and the red-hot stove was still swallowing the sticks that he tossed into its golden ashes. He had done everything he could. In an abandoned empty flat he had found some benches and shelves, brought them in and chopped them up for firewood. He had boiled up a big saucepan of a strange food that might have been either soup or porridge—it was made of groats and lard. He had made everyone eat it; and the boy, who still would not wake up, he fed with a spoon. And now the woman and her children were asleep in bed, and he was sitting on the floor with his sheepskin under him, listening with delight to their gentle breathing.

He was too moved and excited to sleep. He did not want to waste a moment of the immense joy that it was for him to sit there and listen to the steady breathing of those he had fed. Tomorrow he would go away. The food he had brought would last them several days. And what then?

"What is your name?" The sound of her voice made him start.

The woman was awake. He turned from the glow of the open stove towards the bed. Perhaps she had been awake for a long time? But the bed was in darkness and he could see nothing.

"Konstantin Ignatyevich," he replied.

He waited for a moment, then asked: "What's yours?"

"Maria," she said.

She fell silent; he thought she had gone to sleep again, and dared not ask more.

How could he go away tomorrow? How could he leave them here alone?

6

In the end he dropped off to sleep without noticing it, curled up on his sheepskin. Tired out by the journey and the frost, he slept soundly, without dreams, and it was many hours before he awoke.

Outside the frosted window morning was already well advanced and the room was full of pale winter daylight. The stove was going again, with a kettle singing on it. At first, Lunin could not remember how he came to be here, and when he remembered, he felt embarrassed because he was lying right in the middle of the room and everyone had watched him stretch himself as he woke up.

The children were looking at him from the bed—now the boy was awake as well as the girl. They were no longer wrapped in shawls because the room was warm, and they sat among the pillows like birds in a nest, and he could see their bare, incredibly thin arms. Their mother was standing by the window, also watching him in silence. An old woman he had never seen before was peeping at him through the open door. She, however, disappeared almost at once, closing the door behind her.

Evidently they had all been waiting a long time for him to wake up. He noticed at once that while he had slept they had not touched the food.

"Breakfast! What about breakfast!" he cried, smiling.

Soon they were all drinking hot water with sugar and munching bread. Porridge was boiling in the saucepan. It gave Lunin immense pleasure to feed them, to watch them eating.

The woman talked to Lunin simply, as if to an old acquaintance. She told him that for several days her little boy had been quite unable to talk, but that today he had started talking again.

"Sergei, do you like this man?" she asked her son.

The boy smiled shyly with his mouth full, and averted his eyes without answering. How thin his neck was!

"What am I?" Lunin asked.

"A sailor!" the little boy replied, gazing delightedly at the gold rings on Lunin's sleeves.

After swallowing a few spoonfuls of porridge, the children again fell asleep. They were so weak that a full stomach at once made them sleepy. Their mother and Lunin went on drinking hot water, he sitting on his sheepskin, she on the edge of the bed.

"I didn't notice yesterday that you were in the Navy," she said. "You had your sheepskin on. . . ."

She seemed about to ask something, but changed her mind and said nothing.

But he thought he had guessed what she wanted to know.

"Where is their father?" he asked softly, nodding at the children.

"He's dead," she said.

"Killed?"

"No. He died before the war. From an illness."

So he had been mistaken. He had thought she wanted to ask him if he had met her husband anywhere.

He learned from her that she was a schoolmistress, that her school had been evacuated in the summer and she had

been left behind here because she had been digging anti-tank ditches. She told him about her work in a workshop, where they made warm hats for servicemen. She showed Lunin several dozen finished hats, but from what she said Lunin concluded that she had not been to the workshop for some time, because she had no strength to use her sewing-machine.

"But I'll go today definitely," she said. "If you'd just help me to put the machine up on the window-sill, please. Now I've had something to eat I can sew again. I'll go and take them these hats, and bring back some more cut-outs. . . ."

"If their workshop's still going," he said doubtfully. "If they're still working there. . . ."

"They'll be there all right," she said confidently.

"I'm not so sure," he said, still doubting. "You couldn't work your machine. And I don't suppose they get any more bread than you."

"No, they don't," she said. "But it's mostly women without children who go there now. . . ."

"What difference . . ." he began, but broke off, realizing himself what the difference was. A woman without children ate her bread herself, little though it was, but the mothers gave everything to their children.

How can I leave her here? he thought. He had prolonged their life for a few days, and that was all. When he left, she would die, and her children would die, too. How can I leave her here?

While he looked at this small pale emaciated face that had become singularly dear to him, he could think only of the inevitability of her death, and the thought was so agonizing that he started up and began to pull on his sheepskin.

"Are you going already?" she asked, timidly placing her hand on his sleeve.

"Yes."

"But you aren't going away altogether? You'll come back, won't you?"

"I don't know when I shall be leaving.... Tomorrow at the latest.... When there's a lorry going my way. I've got to be back at my unit the day after tomorrow."

"Where's that? Far away?"

"The other side of the ring...."

"I thought so.... But you'll call again before you leave? You will, won't you?"

"I will."

"You are sure?"

"Yes," he said.

He put on his cap, but she still kept her hand on his sleeve, and he could not bring himself to move away from her.

"I won't thank you, because no thanks could be enough, you know that yourself," she said. "I realize it wasn't for me you did it. That makes it easy for me to accept...."

No, I can't leave her here, he thought, looking at her clear, smooth forehead.

"Maria ..." he began.

She looked up, but then, without saying anything, he turned and left.

He had to go to Vasilyevsky Island and find a certain Comrade Sharapov of the division's political department. This Sharapov was to help him get on a lorry that was returning to the regiment. Tararaksin had advised him before he left to apply to Sharapov. If he could only get her and the children on that lorry and take them across the lake....

7

He was impatient to find everything out and arrange things, and he hurried. He knew that the division's political department near the headquarters on Poklonnaya Hill had another office in the city where regiment personnel

stayed when travelling through Leningrad. Sharapov, the man he wanted to see, would be there. The day was as cold and sunny as yesterday, but the wind had freshened and there was a sharper bite in it. Lunin walked towards the Nevsky through the deep snow of Mayakovsky Street, which seemed very broad because it was completely deserted.

At the corner, in Zhukovsky Street, there was a baker's with a queue of black muffled figures standing outside it in the wind. The shop door was locked. They were waiting for bread. They had been waiting a long time, a very long time. Lunin walked round the queue, trying not to look at them.

He came out into the Nevsky and walked towards the Admiralty. Snow-spray was sweeping across the Nevsky, just as on Lake Ladoga. Here and there a tiny figure stumbled about in the huge drifts. A pale light sky, a sun without life or heat, the cold beauty of the huge buildings....

The besieged city spread out before Lunin in all its stern and unrelenting splendour. A city in distress, a city in mortal danger, but nowhere any alarm, or weakness, or fear. There was calm resolution in the eyes of the be-shawled women with their dark emaciated faces, there was calm resolution in the eyes of the gaunt-faced soldiers in sheepskins who saluted Lunin at the street corners. Their glances made Lunin calmer and firmer. No, it was not pity that these people wanted....

At the end of the Nevsky, in front of the Admiralty, the path Lunin had been following became so slippery that it was hard to walk. The trampled snow was covered with a film of ice. Lunin soon realized how it had come about. He kept passing women with pails of water. The water splashed out of the pails and froze, turning the path into a sheet of ice.

Exhausted by the weight of the pails, the women had to sit down every three or four paces in the snow to rest.

Apparently, in this part of the city adjoining the Neva, there was no water supply at all. Every time he saw a woman sit down on the icy snow, Lunin felt afraid she would never get up again. But no, they got on to all fours, then struggled slowly to their feet and dragged their pails a little farther.

This was probably the most crowded place in the city. Everyone who came for water from the Nevsky, Gorokhovaya Street, and the Voznesensky Prospekt converged on this spot. Amid the clang of pails and splashing of water Lunin followed the slippery path round to the right of the Admiralty, skirted the Palace Square, where the wind was whipping the snow into golden sunlit fountains, and came out on to the Palace Bridge.

The Neva spread out before him. A frosty haze, bluish-gold in the sunlight, hung over its broad surface. The first thing he noticed was two huge fires on the Petrograd Side. Two buildings very close together near Birzhevoi Bridge were on fire. Two columns of reddish smoke, swirling and billowing, towered skywards. But the women with pails took no notice of the smoke or the burning buildings. They were crowding round a broad stone flight of steps that led down on to the ice.

When Lunin went up to the granite embankment wall and glanced down, he saw a large black pool of water cut out of the ice about fifty paces from the bank. It was surrounded by women. Women with pails were crawling timidly towards it on their knees, for the water that had been spilt and frozen had made it too slippery to walk upright. Having filled their pails, they crawled back in the same way, pushing their pails and splashing themselves with cold water. When they recovered their breath, they dragged themselves to their feet, clinging weakly to one another. Now the most difficult part began: to carry a full pail up the slope on to the embankment.

The stone steps, crusted with snow and ice that had formed from spilt water, had become an icy slope ten

feet high, polished smooth, and rising at an angle of forty-five degrees. Even a healthy person would not have found it easy to climb. These women, scarcely alive after many months of starvation, scrambled up it with heavy pails of water; they scrambled up it, clinging to each other, they crawled on all fours, spilled their water, slid down to the bottom, and again tried to crawl. It was an endless battle for water, a battle with heavy casualties. At the bottom of the steps, resembling an ugly heap of rags, there lay, frozen into the ice, the bodies of those who had failed to reach the top.

Panting in the wind, Lunin made his way over the long bridge to Vasilyevsky Island. Here the city was even more deserted, and there was even more soft, untrampled snow in the streets. He knew that he should look for Sharapov somewhere behind the University, and he went right round the long University building without meeting a single person. The Academy of Sciences library, institutes of some kind. Huge buildings, narrow side-streets. He lost his way among them and there was no one to ask.

A very familiar, very loud and unexpected sound brought him to a sudden halt.

It was the roar of an aircraft engine, an unsteady, intermittent roar. By the sound of it the engine was out of order and being tested.

Looking up, Lunin saw a long boarded fence with squat roofs buried in snow behind it. The roar was coming from there, from behind the fence. What was it? A factory? A military repair unit? At any rate, there was undoubtedly some work going on there. In this besieged city where there was no electricity, no fuel, no bread—nothing except incredible determination—a factory was working.

The roar of the engine ceased.

"Hullo. . . ."

Lunin turned round and saw a boy in a sturdy black overcoat, felt boots, and a hat with ear-flaps. A small

pinched face. Calm wide-set eyes that Lunin had seen somewhere before.

"Ah!" Lunin exclaimed. "Rostislav Vsevolodovich! It's you, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the boy with dignity. "I knew you at once, I've been running after you all the way from that corner. . . ."

"Do you still go and dig potatoes?" Lunin asked.

"Haven't been for a long time. It's no good. The Germans don't often shell the field now, they're mainly shelling the city. And anyway the snow's so deep you can't get there."

"How's your Grandad? You live with your Grandad, don't you?" Lunin said. "See, I remember all about you."

"He's dead."

"Dead!" Lunin exclaimed. "But who's looking after you? Are you all alone?"

"No, I'm with my sister."

"Is your sister about your age?"

"No, she's older."

"And how did you get here?"

"This is where I live. In the house you're looking for."

"How do you know what house I'm looking for?"

"Of course, I know it," the boy said with a laugh. "I guessed at once where you were going. I'll show you the way."

They went on together. It was impossible to walk abreast along the narrow path. The boy ran ahead and kept looking back.

"Will you be going away today?" he asked. "Of course, you will. Why should you stay here? You've got to fly. You know what I wanted to ask you? Take me with you."

"Where?"

"To your station."

Lunin looked at the boy in surprise.

"Why do you want to go there?"

"I love aeroplanes. I love them better than anything

else. I want to fly. No, don't laugh." He turned round to see if Lunin was laughing, but he was not. "I don't mean I could fly at once. But I'll learn. And while I'm learning, I'll do anything.... Clear snow. Clean things. Wave a flag, if you want me to. I'll do anything you like. Do take me."

"I can't."

"Why can't you? Aren't you allowed or don't you want to?"

"I'm not allowed to."

The boy mused for a second.

"Listen," he said. "Suppose Uvarov gives you permission to take me?"

"Uvarov?" Lunin gasped. "You know Uvarov?"

"Yes," said the boy. "Uvarov's your chief, isn't he? He's above you, isn't he?"

"He is."

"He could give me permission to go to the station, couldn't he? I know he could. He'll agree, if I tell him you agree. And you will agree, won't you? Can I tell him you agree? Yes, I know I can...."

Meanwhile they had turned in through the gates of a large block of flats and entered a yard piled so high with snow that they could not see over the drifts.

"This way, up this staircase," the boy said, opening a door for Lunin. "You want the first floor. Careful, there's another step here. Hi, Sharapov, look who I've brought! Where's Sharapov?"

Slava entered the flat, as if it were his own home. Evidently he wanted to show Lunin that he was known here. And he certainly was known. The mechanics and sailors who filled the room regarded him without the slightest surprise, as if he were one of them.

"Sharapov's gone out. He'll be back in a minute."

Lunin glanced about him. A red-hot stove, with a black pipe leading over the desk to the window. Several cupboards, a typewriter, a neat pile of papers. Very warm and very clean—the parquet floor had even been polished.

Then Lunin noticed a man in a naval officer's greatcoat looking at him from the corner and smiling. He had a senior political organizer's badge on his sleeve. I know that face, Lunin thought. Then he exclaimed: "Why, it's you!"

It was the man who had been with him last August, when they broke through into Leningrad first on a railway engine, then in a passing lorry. Lunin had often remembered that journey and his travelling companion.

"And so we meet again," the senior political organizer said, shaking Lunin's hand.

They were both glad at the meeting and regarded each other with liking and curiosity. He must be the only person in the whole city who hasn't got any thinner, Lunin thought. He was as thin as a clothes-hanger before. And his face was just as yellow. Perhaps he even looks a little better. . . .

"Remember that tank?"

"Not half!" Lunin exclaimed. "I won't forget that as long as I live. It nearly ground us to powder. And to think that was only six months ago!"

"We must have been the last to get into Leningrad by road, although we didn't know it then."

"No, I haven't heard of anyone getting in after us," said Lunin. "You don't mean to say you're in our division?"

"I am."

"You're a journalist, aren't you? . . . Not on our division newspaper?"

"Yes, on *Wings of the Baltic.* I'm the editor."

"Of course!" Lunin exclaimed. " 'Editor: A. Khovrin.' It's got it at the end of every number. So it's you? I might have guessed it."

"Well, I know everything about you, of course. Everyone in the division knows you," said Khovrin.

And indeed Lunin noticed with some embarrassment that he was the centre of attention for everyone in the room.

The mechanics and sailors did not take their eyes off

him, and listened to his conversation with Khovrin, trying not to miss a single word.

"I see you haven't read our last issue," said Khovrin. "Tsvetkov, bring a copy here."

A sailor unfolded a newspaper in front of Lunin and the first thing he saw was his own photograph, in helmet and flying suit, with a broad face that seemed to him almost indecently stupid and self-satisfied. Round the photograph there was a full-page article entitled: "Commander of X Unit." Probably something bombastic and a long way from the truth. What had he done in particular? It would only make him look a fool back in the regiment. Lunin pushed the sheet aside and asked drily: "Where is Sharapov?"

Khovrin seemed rather put out by Lunin's contempt for the article.

"Sharapov will be back in a moment. What do you want him for?"

Lunin explained that he wanted Sharapov's help in getting him a lorry.

"He can do that for you," Khovrin affirmed. "If you don't go today, you'll go tomorrow. I'm waiting for a lorry myself to take me to Poklonnaya Hill. Pity we aren't going the same way."

Lunin became thoughtful. It had suddenly occurred to him that he might ask Khovrin's advice. An editor ought to know a lot. He seemed to be a decent fellow and Lunin needed advice. He stood surveying Khovrin's face hesitantly.

"You know, I should like to talk to you about something," he said at last. "I've got something I want to ask you. If I may. . . ."

"Yes, come in, come in here," said Khovrin readily. "I should like to have a chat with you, too."

He took Lunin into the next room, which was empty, shut the door, offered Lunin a seat on a bed, and sat down beside him, eyeing him with curiosity.

"You probably know this," Lunin began after some hesitation. "Is the civilian population allowed to leave Leningrad by the ice road over Lake Ladoga?"

Khovrin's eyes gleamed with surprise.

"I don't know," he said, "but I think it's probably not allowed yet."

"Not yet? Why not?"

"If it was allowed, the whole city would know about it."

"But why not yet?"

"Because later on it will be allowed."

"Later on? When? When they're all dead?" Lunin asked, feeling that he was beginning to lose his temper.

Khovrin looked at him coldly and said nothing.

"No, I simply want to know the reason," Lunin said, regretting his outburst and taking a grip on himself. "There must be a reason for everything. Do you understand why it isn't allowed yet?"

"I think I do," Khovrin said after a moment's silence. "Because the road isn't ready for that yet. They've only just made the road, they've got to use it first to bring at least a little food into the city, to bring in munitions, to replace some of the troops. What would happen, if now, in the middle of the January frosts, crowds of starving women and children poured on to the ice? They'd simply die, every one of them. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," Lunin agreed, imagining the situation. "But why will it be allowed later?"

"Don't think that I know anything, this is simply my own supposition and no more," said Khovrin. "People who aren't needed for defence ought to be evacuated. They are only dying here to no purpose and eating what little food can be brought into the city. It's just as important to bring people out of the city as it is to bring food in. In fact, it's the same thing. And the road across the ice is, of course, intended for both purposes. But to bring out people who are weak and ill, there must be posts on the road equipped for feeding hundreds of thousands of

people, there must be places for all these thousands of people to warm themselves, there must be covered-in lorries, there must be good approach lines between the railway and the lake. And how many other things are needed to bring those people out alive and not strew the road with corpses. There must be a plan of evacuation, for example, a very strict system of priority, because hundreds of thousands have to be brought out and the road's capacity is very small. . . ."

"How soon will this organized evacuation begin?" Lunin asked.

"I am sure they are making every effort to start it as soon as possible," Khovrin said.

After a pause he added: "It's not only a matter of time. It's also a matter of what the Germans will do when we start mass evacuation. It may very likely happen that the battle for the road is yet to come."

"You think that, too?" Lunin asked, remembering his conversation with Uvarov.

"Yes, that's how it seems to me."

They were silent. Khovrin realized that Lunin had something else he wanted to ask—the main thing—and he waited. Lunin frowned; it was not easy to begin.

"You've seen what's going on in the city?" he asked grimly.

"I have."

"Well, what do you think ought to be done?"

"Everyone ought to do everything that is in his power."

"Well, it's in my power, for example, to take a woman and two children out of here. Should I do it or not?"

Khovrin eyed his face keenly.

"Do you really feel you could?"

"Of course, I could, if I'm allowed to!" Lunin burst out. "I'm going myself. I know that some people get permission. When I was coming here, I met a captain from the Volkhov front. He had been into Leningrad on a job,

just like me, and he was bringing his wife out with him. I know she only got as far as the lake before she died. . . ."

"There you are," said Khovrin. "He also thought he could manage it, but he didn't. What makes you think you'll be able to? You'll have to go in a lorry, on some boxes or barrels, you know yourself what the frost is like. They may die on the road, too."

"Perhaps they will," Lunin said. "But if they stay here, they'll die for certain. No, if only you could get me permission. After all, that captain got permission."

"He probably got permission because she was his wife. . . ."

"This is my wife and my children," Lunin said, looking Khovrin straight in the eye.

Then he remembered telling Khovrin he was divorced.

Khovrin's face was expressionless, but Lunin felt without a shadow of doubt that Khovrin remembered, too.

Lunin had lied and knew that his lie was not believed. But not a muscle in his face trembled, as though he had long been accustomed to lying. He waited to see what Khovrin's reaction would be.

"It's a pity you didn't tell Uvarov before you left," Khovrin said. "If you had told him you wanted to bring your family out, he would have helped you. Last week he helped my printer Tsvetkov to get his family out. Two women and a child in a very bad state. We put them in a lorry that was taking bombs round to the stations. The driver promised to get them through, but there's been no news of them yet. What a pity you didn't tell Uvarov."

"Yes, it is," Lunin agreed, reflecting that during his conversation with Uvarov he had not known he had a wife and two children to be brought out of Leningrad. "It's a pity, but. . . ."

"But it's no good regretting it now," Khovrin caught him up. "Well, we'll try and fix it without Uvarov. No, it's no good your talking to Sharapov. I'll talk to him myself, now."

Can he really help? Will it be any good? Lunin thought with a faint glimmer of hope, when Khovrin went out, leaving him alone in the room. He's a wonderfully kind fellow. I liked him the first time I saw him in spite of his sallow face. He's rather dry and restrained, but he's kind....

Khovrin was a long time coming back and Lunin did not know how things were going. He realized that it was a matter of getting a signature. Suppose Sharapov, as a political department worker, knew that Lunin had no wife or children. Probably he did know. At last the door flew open and Lunin heard Khovrin say:

"I take full responsibility."

And then:

"You won't have to explain anything to the division commissar, I'll do that."

Closing the door behind him, Khovrin came up to Lunin and said: "Come here tomorrow morning. You'll collect your pass, wait for the lorry, then pick them up and fire ahead."

Lunin jumped to his feet in a hurry. He had still to get Maria's consent. He had not said a word to her about it yet.

They all saw him to the door—Khovrin, the mechanics and sailors, and the boy Slava. There was affection and friendship in their eyes and obviously they all knew what was happening. At the door Lunin remembered that he had not even thanked Khovrin. He turned round and gripped Khovrin's hand in both his own.

"You don't know how much you've done for me," he said.

Slava went out with Lunin and walked with him to the corner of the street.

"So you'll be coming here tomorrow?" he said, looking up into Lunin's face. "All right then, I'll tell Uvarov you don't mind me living at the station."

8

They crossed the lake at night. Lunin lay in the back of the lorry and gazed up at the small northern stars glittering like salt in the vast blackness of the sky. He could see nothing but the stars and it seemed as if the earth had disappeared and he were suspended in a huge vacuum of darkness and unbearable cold. In the whole icy universe there was only one thing that was warm—the sleeping child under his sheepskin, who warmed his side like a little stove.

Lunin was afraid to move in case he disturbed the child. The feeling of warmth in this little living bundle filled him with joy. The boy was not getting cold, so he must be still alive, alive!

Lunin himself was bitterly cold, he could not feel his own feet and he was not even sure whether he could still move them. The lorry was carrying long, cigar-shaped aircraft torpedoes wrapped in sackcloth, and Lunin was lying in a hollow between two of them. The torpedoes were even colder than the air and through the sackcloth, through his sheepskin coat he could feel the iciness of their rounded metal casing. At any other time such a journey would have been torture. But ever since he had given this strange woman the bread he had brought with him, and had decided to save her children, he had been in a strangely elevated state of mind that would not allow him to think of himself, and made him insensitive to all privation and discomfort.

After leaving Khovrin, he had hurried back down Mayakovsky Street to persuade her as soon as possible to undertake the journey, and to help her prepare for it. He remembered that she had intended going to her workshop and was very worried that he might not find her at home. He thought impatiently of every possible delay. Hastily mounting the stairs, he pushed open the door and entered the flat. He stopped in the hall and listened. Not a sound.

He went into her room. She was lying fully dressed on her bed between her two children.

His heart stopped beating when he saw their pale still faces, they were too pale to be alive. But when he listened, he heard their quiet breathing. They were asleep. He had not expected to find her asleep and glanced round helplessly, not knowing whether to wake her or not.

His courage failed him and he waited, hoping desperately that she would wake up. The room was cold again and he relighted the stove. He noticed that there was not a drop of water in the pail and went down to the cellar for water. Then he began rearranging the provisions on the newspaper in the corner. All this he did without trying to be particularly quiet, and every moment he would glance round to see if she had woken. When he chopped some sticks for the fire he made a great amount of noise. But neither she nor the children awoke at the sound of the axe.

He had nothing more to do and, leaning over the front of the bed, he stood looking at her face. First he wondered how old she was. Starvation had blurred all distinction of age in the faces of the women and, old or young, they all seemed equally ageless. She was probably about thirty. Before the war she must have had a round face with a short gentle nose. A nice face, but very ordinary. But now all this could only be guessed at. Her cheeks were sunken and her face did not seem at all round. Because of the dark shadows under her eyes the sockets looked enormous. The eyebrows, slightly raised, as if in surprise, on that clear, unlined forehead, gave the face an expression of defencelessness that made Lunin's heart contract. Crushed by his burden of tenderness, he gazed and gazed at her and could not gaze enough.

Then he heard quick scraping footsteps on the other side of the door and remembered that there was also an old woman in the flat. Thank goodness she, at least, was not asleep. Lunin opened the door into the passage and saw the old woman slip away into the kitchen. He followed her.

She was a very old woman, stooped, with a dark wrinkled face, owlish eyes without lashes, and big yellow hands with swollen knuckles. She stood at the kitchen window and faced Lunin without blinking.

"Good afternoon," Lunin said.

She said something in reply, but he could not understand it. She began telling him something in a great hurry, but her story seemed to start from the middle and he could not understand it, for he did not know the beginning. She was telling him something about a man who was quite unknown to him and Lunin could make out only that this man was also in the forces, and that it should have been this man, not Lunin, who brought them the food. Then everything would have been all right and as it should be.

"But who are you talking about?"

"About him," the old woman said. "Last summer he came here and sat with me here in the kitchen and couldn't bring himself to leave, but then he went, and now he hasn't written a single letter."

"But who is he?" Lunin asked. "Her husband?"

"No, not her husband. Her husband's dead. He was a good man. But he gave her a lot of trouble, too—kept being ill and then died. But I don't know who this one is. In the forces. Been in them since before the war. All last spring used to come here every Sunday. When it didn't matter, he always called, and now it matters—he's vanished."

So that's it! On top of everything some scoundrel had deserted her! Lunin thought, frowning. His sympathy for her became even stronger. Without hesitation, he judged the unknown serviceman a scoundrel. Only a scoundrel could deceive her and betray her like this.

"Is she waiting for him?"

"I don't know. If you ask, she says she isn't."

"And if you don't ask?"

"Then she seems to be waiting."

Lunin was silent.

The old woman was also silent for a little, then she said: "Perhaps he's been killed."

Of course, he might easily have been killed, and Lunin's wrath minght be quite unjust and uncalled for. Lunin realized this, but still could not help feeling a dislike for the man. But what did it matter to him, none of this was his business. He had to get her out of here, that was all.

"Has she been asleep for long?" he asked.

"She dropped off as soon as you went away."

"So she didn't go to the workshop?"

"She was getting ready to go, then dropped off to sleep."

"Do you think she'll wake up soon?"

"No, she'll go on sleeping now."

"For how long?"

"Until someone wakes her. Because she's eaten something."

"Why didn't you go to sleep then? You've eaten, too."

"I'll sleep enough when I'm dead. There'll be no sleep for me till then."

He waited until evening. Several times he went into the room and stood over them, watching them in their sleep. He coughed, banged the pail, then the stove; once or twice he even, as though by accident, jogged the bed. But she and the children went on sleeping. He got desperate. When it began to grow dark, he placed the lamp so that the light fell on her face. Her lashes quivered, but she did not wake. Then he screwed up his courage and touched her hand.

She opened her eyes. In the flickering light of the lamp they appeared huge and dark.

"Is it you?" she asked quietly and pressed his hand with a scarcely discernible movement of her fingers.

Many times later he remembered how glad she was to see him, and how she had pressed his hand. She lowered her feet from the bed, sat up, put her hair straight, and looked at him affectionately. He told her everything in an excited rush of words.

She listened silently. He took her silence for disagreement. He became afraid she would refuse to go, and he insisted, demanded, piling one argument on top of another. He told her that if she stayed here she would die without bringing any aid to victory; that here she and her children were eating bread that was needed by the soldiers defending the city; that she had no right to sacrifice her children in this senseless fashion; that Hitler wanted her children to die like this, that he had ordered this siege for that reason, and if she saved her children, she would defeat Hitler's plans; that out there across the lake, when she got better and got her children better, she could work or fight, whichever she liked, and be a useful person to the country. And again and again he insisted that she had no right to sacrifice her children.

She listened in silence, but the expression on her face gradually changed, and he watched her face eagerly, striving to guess what was going on in her mind.

"Very well," she said. "But what about Anna Stepanovna? I can't leave Anna Stepanovna."

Anna Stepanovna? Who was she? That old woman in the kitchen? He hadn't thought of her. But it didn't matter, there was time to put that right, tomorrow he would ask them to include her as well. He could say she was a relative, her aunt or mother. He would go to the kitchen straightaway and tell Anna Stepanovna that he would take her with him tomorrow.

But he did not have to go to the kitchen, because it turned out that Anna Stepanovna had been peering in through the doorway all the time. He told her at once that he would take her with him the following day, and she at once refused to go. He was surprised and, thinking she had not understood, heatedly began to explain things all over again. Apparently, however, she had understood everything perfectly, but considered all his arguments completely unfounded. She did not argue with him and gave no reasons; she just flatly refused. She had nowhere to go

and no reason for going, she had lived three quarters of a century in this district, she knew every stone, every staircase, every person who lived here, and the force that kept her alive—active curiosity—was entirely concentrated on this district. This was the only place for her to live and die.

"Then I won't go, either," said Maria.

Lunin looked at her desperately. He felt utterly helpless, but Anna Stepanovna came to his aid.

"Yes, you will," she said discontentedly. "How can you compare yourself with me? I've got no one to feed."

As soon as Anna Stepanovna began to talk, she talked endlessly, rambling all over the place and bringing up examples quite incomprehensible to Lunin, but always returning to the theme that she had no one to feed, whereas the children had a long, long time to live. Then they hugged each other and kissed and cried. Anna Stepanovna, however, did not seem to cry; apparently she was not sentimental.

And so it was all decided.

They left towards the end of the following day in a heavy lorry loaded with torpedoes. The children were in a bad way. The little boy had vomited twice before they left, and the girl slept all the time, scarcely waking; she was even half-asleep while she ate. How could they take them like this in a lorry through the freezing night?

The driver turned out to be an elderly man, very tired, and for that reason, probably, rather gloomy. He frowned on learning at the political department that he was to call for the major's family, but afterwards tried to do everything possible to make them comfortable. He made room in his cramped cab for both children and the mother, and helped Lunin to wrap them up warmly. In the cab the children, their faces heavily muffled, immediately fell asleep, nestling up to their mother. Dusk fell. Lunin climbed into the back and the lorry moved off.

The twenty-five miles to the lake took them over two

hours. The road across the Karelian Isthmus ran through forest, they were hemmed in on both sides by dark fir-trees, and the sky, now quite dark, flowed above Lunin like a narrow stream of stars. Lunin knew nothing of what was going on in the cab, and could find out nothing. That was all that worried him; he was quite indifferent to the penetrating cold of the torpedoes on which he was lying, and the icy wind. Worse still, the driver was in a great hurry and the heavily loaded lorry could only move slowly, so that there was no hope of stopping to get warm. The driver was hurrying because he had been ordered to deliver the torpedoes to Volkhovstroi Station at dawn, and he could not violate an order.

They drove to the lake with their headlights burning, and kept them on when they drove out over the lake. The lorries that passed them every minute in the other direction also drove with all lights on. All the way across the lake the road was marked with hundreds of lights that stretched away to the dark horizon. The ice road was not blacked-out at night. By the second half of January, experience had shown that neither the German artillery nor the German bombers could cause so much damage and loss and so many disasters as were caused by creeping across the ice in complete darkness among the fresh cracks that were always forming, by the narrow bridges, the snowdrifts, the pot-holes, the ridges, and the oncoming lorries that loomed suddenly out of the darkness. And the drivers had been allowed to switch on their lights.

They had not driven more than two miles across the ice, when the lorry suddenly stopped and the driver got out. Lunin raised his head in alarm.

"That's a good sheepskin you're wearing," the driver said quietly, coming round to the back of the lorry. "The boy's getting frozen in the cab, I'm afraid he won't last out. Unbutton your coat and put him right next to your body, it may warm him. I've had this happen before, it does a lot of good. And it'll be warmer for you, too. . . ."

Jumping down, Lunin somehow dragged his frozen feet to the cab. Her frightened eyes looked out at him from the darkness. When he took the boy out of the cab, Lunin could scarcely make out whether he was breathing or not. Maria's fear flashed over to him. For the first time he doubted whether he had been right to take them out of the city.

But the boy was still breathing, though very faintly. Unbuttoning his coat, jacket, and shirt, Lunin pressed the little bundle to his body. At first, the boy seemed to him icy cold. Wrapping his sheepskin over him as tightly as he could, he again climbed into the back and lay down in his former position. The lorry started. Everything disappeared except the cold stars scattered across the sky like grains of salt, but every minute the boy was getting warmer. He was not only warm himself, he was warming Lunin. He was alive.

The stars had moved far across the sky. Lunin had grown so tired of waiting for the end of the road that he was surprised when the lorry suddenly began to climb and he saw among the stars above him the spiky tops of fir-trees. They stopped. He raised his head over the edge of the lorry. A big cottage was vaguely outlined in the darkness. Not Kobona at last?

The driver got out.

"Come down, Comrade Major," he said. "You can warm up for an hour. I shan't be late now."

They entered the cottage—the driver in front with the sleeping girl in his arms, behind the driver, the mother, who seemed to Lunin amazingly small, even smaller than before, behind her, Lunin with the boy. A blissful, unbelievably wonderful warmth flowed over them, a warmth loaded with reassuring human smells of tobacco, bread, and sheepskin. The big Russian stove in the middle of the cottage was burning and the light of the flames danced in the corners and up the walls. There was no other light, but this was enough to show that the whole floor of the

cottage was littered with sleeping bodies. Men and women sleeping in sheepskins, greatcoats, wadded jackets, shawls, all together, heads thrown back, mouths open, indifferent in their exhaustion even to the big black cockroaches that crawled over their cheeks and foreheads. There were drivers, railwaymen, loaders, storekeepers, there were people on their way into Leningrad, and people on their way out of Leningrad, and all kinds of people of every trade, military and civilian, for this cottage standing on a front-line road had long since lost its owners and was open to anyone who cared to enter and find himself a vacant bit of floor space.

The driver with the confidence of a man who knew the place well led them stepping boldly over the scattered bodies to a far corner that was a little less crowded, and found them a seat on some sacks. Only then did Lunin draw the boy out of the depths of his sheepskin. Maria watched his hands with strained intensity. The boy was breathing calmly in his sleep, his soft lips gently parted; his hands and feet were warm.

She took him from Lunin impatiently, even a little roughly, and put him on her knees clasping him to her breast. And suddenly the boy stretched himself, opened his eyes, recognized his mother and smiled.

"He'll be all right now," said the driver.

Making a clatter with his soldier's mess-tin, he went off to get some hot water and in a few minutes they were all munching bread and washing it down with hot water, which they sipped in turn from a tin mug. The boy also ate and drank eagerly, and the girl ate and drank, nestling up to her mother and looking round curiously at the cottage, the stove, and the sleepers. Noticing Lunin, she smiled at him with shy tenderness, as if he were an old friend.

Her mother smiled at Lunin, too, and even asked if he had not been frozen in the back of the lorry, but she was utterly absorbed in her children, happy that they were

alive and eating. Lunin sat a little apart in a dark corner, where his face could not be seen, and silently watched her and her children.

He knew that he had not more than half an hour to watch them. He had made up his mind not to go with her as far as Volkhovstroi. He would say good-bye to them here, and at dawn make straight for his station, which was only about nine miles away. He had fed them, he had brought them across the lake, and now they could come to no harm. That same day, in a few hours' time, they would get into a train, into a well-heated carriage, and be taken to Vologda, and from there they could go where they liked; and everyone who met them on the road would try to help them in every way, just as this elderly, tired, gloomy driver had done. But Lunin had to get back to the station as soon as possible, back to Serov, to Proskuryakov, to his mechanics; it was awkward to have stayed away so long, even if he would not get a reprimand. After all, Uvarov had let him go only to inspect the road.

When the children had eaten, they again fell asleep, nestling up to their mother. Without moving, so as not to disturb them, she kept glancing tenderly and trustingly towards the dark corner where Lunin was sitting. But whenever she glanced at him attentively, Lunin would close his eyes to make her think he was asleep. Believing that he was, she stopped looking at him and became absorbed in her own thoughts. But through his half-closed lashes he gazed at her radiant face and counted the minutes. Fifteen more minutes to see her, now it was ten, now it was five....

The driver ate and drank for a long time, then went off into a far corner to talk now with one person, now with another—he knew many people here. At last he announced that he was going outside to look at the lorry. Another three minutes, Lunin thought. But the driver was away much longer than he expected, so long that she even dozed off, her head resting on her daughter's. Lunin did

not take his eyes off her. He was even beginning to hope that something had happened to the lorry and they would stay here till morning. But the driver came in and it was time to say good-bye.

When Lunin told her he would not be going with them any farther, it seemed to him that she was hurt. He hastened to explain that she would not need him at all for the rest of the journey. Had she asked him to go, he could not have held out and would, of course, have accompanied her to Volkhovstroi. But she did not ask. The driver carried the girl to the door, but still she stood with her son in her arms before Lunin, looking hesitantly into his face.

"We'll see each other again some time, won't we?" she said suddenly.

"Maybe," he said.

She seemed about to ask something else, but the question would not come, and he did not help her. He made the first move towards the door and they left the cottage together.

The stars had set. A cold dawn was rising beyond the eastern trees. The driver helped her and the children into the cab.

"You'll be going through the forest now, it'll be warmer," he said.

A last glance, a last clasp of her small mittened hand. The lorry crept forward and vanished at the bend, behind the next big cottage.

Lunin should have gone back into the cottage and waited for a lorry going in the direction of his station. But now the stuffiness of the cottage revolted him. In spite of his sleepless night, he still felt quite fresh and, since he no longer had any sacks to hamper him, he suddenly decided to walk to his station on foot.

He strode quickly through the lightening forest and thought of her. Not really thought but kept remembering her face, hands, eyes, walk, smile, words. He seemed to

carry her with him, invisible yet visible. He saw the sun rise, he saw its dazzling rays break through between the shaggy purple trunks of the pines. She had asked him if they would see each other again. What else had she wanted to ask? Perhaps he ought to have given her his field post-office number? But what for? She did not need him any more. She had been like that only out of politeness, only because she had not wanted to appear ungrateful. She was full of somebody else, couldn't he see that. . . . It was no good.

No good, no good, no good, he repeated, as he strode along over the crisp beaten snow into the light of the rising sun, stepping aside for lorries to pass and responding cheerfully to the greetings of the soldiers. From the numerous dug-outs hidden in the forest there came a smell of smoke and bread. Before he had been walking for two hours, he sighted through the trees ahead of him the bare white hill on which Rassokhin was buried, and felt he was home. Here there was everything he needed. Here was the long village street, the smoke rising from the chimney of the big mess building. Hilda would be there, waiting to give him breakfast. Here was the forked birch-tree with its tracery of frost-coated branches. Lunin entered the cottage. Serov, just out of bed, was sitting at the window, shaving. Yes, he needed Serov.

It moved him to see how glad Serov was at his arrival. He was glad himself, even more than he had expected. But they did not say much. While Lunin washed, Serov told him what had happened in the squadron—all little things, nothing important. And only on their way to the mess did Serov ask: "Did you manage to see your people?"

"I've already told you I don't have anyone there at all," Lunin replied grimly.

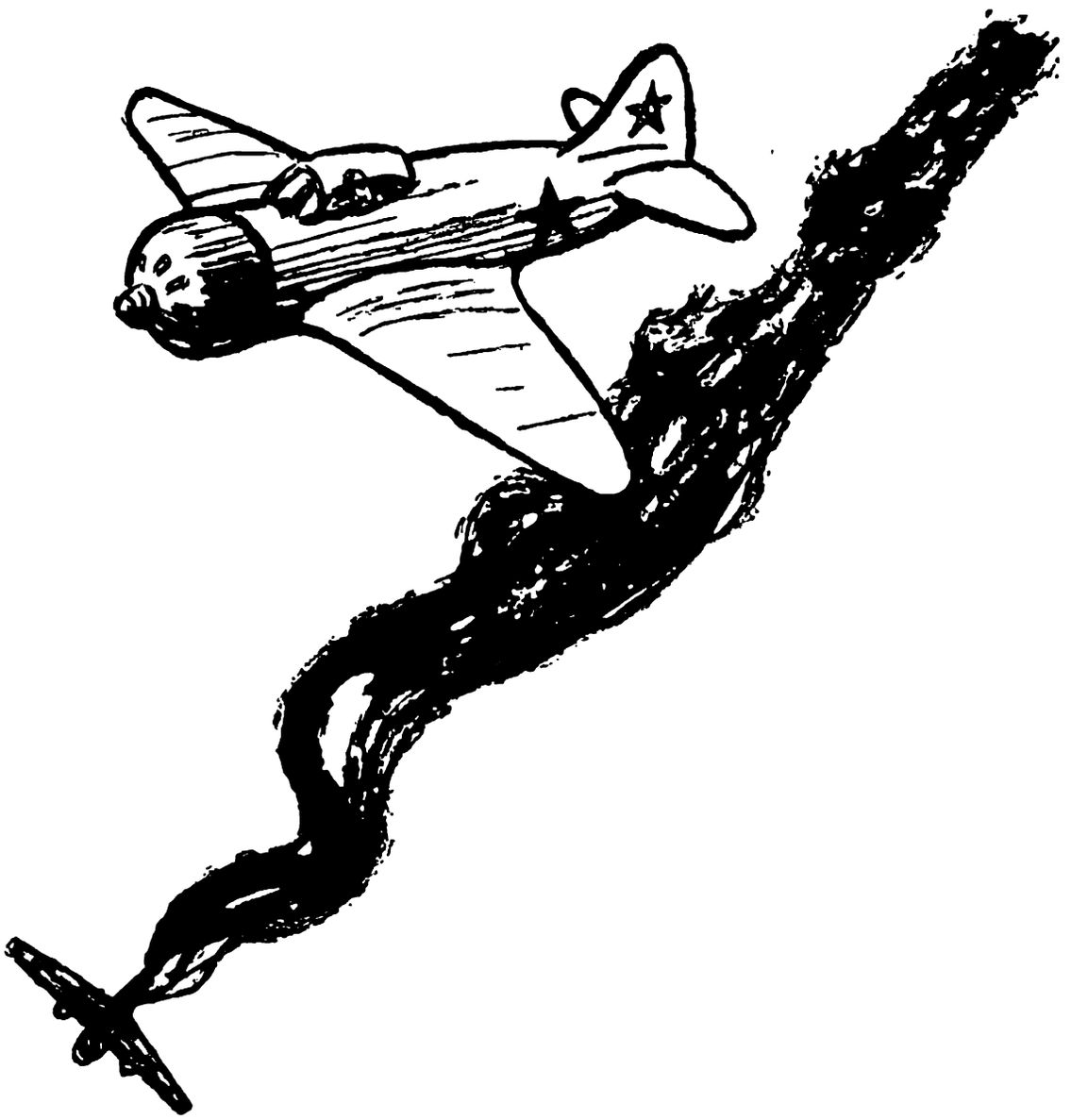
"The people you intended to see, then?"

"I didn't find them."

"Who did you give all the stuff you took with you?"

"The first person I met. What difference does it make."

"Quite right, too," said Serov.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The Guards

1

After they had finished repairing the bath-house the girls gathered in a cold little room in the offices of the district committee of the Komsomol and formed what they called a Komsomol Public Assistance Detachment. Whom they were going to assist was not quite clear at first but they all knew they had one enormous advantage

over most other people—they still had the strength to walk. And it was this advantage they decided to place at the service of those who could no longer walk. On Antonina Trofimovna's advice they made a start by delivering bread to people who had grown too feeble to go to the baker's. They would see what to do next when they got into the houses.

Sonya's assignment was her own block of flats, and a few neighbouring ones. Early next morning she set out on her rounds.

Although it was bright and sunny out of doors that frosty morning, she slipped Grandad's torch into her pocket. She knew she would find some of the flats in pitch darkness even in day-time. People were too weak to arrange the black-out curtains every evening so they would leave them drawn all the time and spend the days in gloom.

In the first flat Sonya entered she found herself burdened with so many cares and responsibilities that she saw clearly she would need months to make her way round all the flats on her list.

It never occurred to her that there was anything particularly extraordinary or splendid about what she was doing. She always thought in simple, concrete terms about the immediate task before her at any given moment: to fetch water, chop up the parquet for firewood, find some way to protect the tenants from the consequences of the broken sewers, or persuade a distrustful person laid up in bed to trust her with his ration cards.

At most homes people were delighted to see her and greeted her with friendly grateful smiles. She often took Slava with her, so that he should not hang about doing nothing, and to help her with the stoves. It was he who lit and tinkered with the stove at home, too; that winter had made him a real expert in such matters and he knew far more about stoves than Sonya. He knew how to get damp wood to burn, how to stop a stove smoking, how to make

it draw properly, how to take off and replace the chimney. He loved the work and applied himself to it zealously, fully aware of his superiority, because there were few men to be found in any of the flats—and what do women know about stoves?

Sonya and Slava would enter a flat through a front door that was never locked and grope along an icy corridor and through empty rooms to the only door in the flat beyond which there was still some warmth and life to be found. Sonya would carefully open the door a little, push Slava in ahead of her and then enter the room herself.

Kind, friendly eyes would watch them from the beds ranged along the walls. Before the war several families had shared this large flat but now some of the tenants had gone to the front, others had left the city during the summer, and others spent the nights at their places of work and failed to come home for long periods at a stretch. Others had died. Those who remained had moved into one room in order to have only one stove burning, and all family distinctions had been forgotten. These people had gradually grown weaker and weaker. They had scarcely noticed the process themselves but as time passed they left the room less frequently, moved their limbs less and less, spent an increasing amount of their time lying in bed, and then one day stopped going out altogether and saw nobody from the outside world except Sonya and Slava. True, in the flat they now entered one old woman received rare visits from her daughter who was working at a tobacco factory now making cartridges, but the people in the room were gladder to see Sonya and Slava than the old woman's daughter.

Although these people, like the others living in neighbouring flats, were physically enfeebled they went on listening to the wireless with undiminished eagerness to know everything that was happening in the world, they followed the course of the war with the keenest interest and suffered agonies of anxiety about their dear ones at

the front. They had not lost one jot of their capacity for love. There was no weakening whatsoever of their spiritual life. Up to the last minute they preserved all their human attributes.

Somehow they had all found out that Sonya and Slava were the grandchildren of an old professor who had died, that their mother had been killed, that their father was at the front and that the two children lived alone now. The old people used to greet their arrival with the remark: "Our little orphans have come."

Sonya and Slava would set to work the moment they arrived. They would fetch bread and water, carry the slops out, sweep the floor and feed the stove. They would listen to letters—to ones that had just been received and to others that they had heard on their last visit. They would tell people of the rumours of a possible increase in the bread ration, and about the Ice Road; they would inform them which of the girls at the baker's had fallen ill and who had died in this house or that, and who was still alive. There was plenty to talk about. The time passed and Sonya never managed to complete her rounds.

To make things worse Antonina Trofimovna soon entrusted her with another matter which was so important and required so much attention that Sonya had even less time for her rounds.

Slava took part in this new work, too. Together they searched for babies who were in need of succour.

The district committee of the Party had put Antonina Trofimovna in charge of organizing the district infants' home. Some emergency food supplies were allocated for the purpose, though they did not amount to much. It happened just at a time when Antonina Trofimovna lost the use of her legs. Clad in a white smock, she was confined to a chair in her office watching through the open door over the big room filled with cots. The infants' home occupied a flat which after a week of worry and effort they had managed to get heated. Antonina Trofimovna was assisted

by a woman doctor who was still strong enough to get about. Besides, there were several "nannies," recruited from among the girls who had helped Sonya repair the baths.

No longer did Sonya and Slava limit their rounds to the houses in their neighbourhood, where they knew everything only too well; they went to a new house, to new people every time. A surprise awaited them at every step and they had to be on their guard and keep their wits about them.

So as not to be working at random Sonya usually began by asking some questions. She would ask the tenants of flats Nos. 12 and 14 about those occupying No. 13. Why was the door of flat No. 13 always locked and nobody seen coming out of it? Ah, everybody had been evacuated during the summer—so that was the reason. And what about Nos. 17 and 19 and the flat downstairs, the one next to the janitor's place? If there were several people in the conversation, the number of houses and flats she gathered information about would increase and she would hear many new names and stories of people's lives. In this way she learned that a certain Klava who lived in the flat next to the janitor's place had a babe-in-arms. It had been born in early April, while there was still snow on the ground, so now he must be—let's see—over ten months old. Had anybody seen Klava lately? People would rake their memories and start guessing. Sonya and Slava would set out on their search.

Slava was usually the one to go ahead. He put all his heart and soul into these searches, and while they were on he would allow nothing to distract him. He loved having to crawl into a locked flat through a broken window or a hole in the wall, he loved attics and smashed staircases, he loved to follow up some elaborate clue, and the more intricate the clue the more implicitly he believed in it.

One day they found a motherless mite and this brought

about an unexpected encounter between Sonya and Sharapov, the Red Navy man—the one who was engaged on some secret military work in one of the flats in their house and whom Slava knew well.

Sonya and Slava had wandered into a flat. It was dark, cold and empty; all the furniture had been burnt, the stoves were cold, the black-out curtains were drawn. Not a living soul. When they reached the kitchen they suddenly heard a faint stirring in the next room. They retraced their steps and entered the room, which was dark as a cave.

The round circle of torchlight fell upon a woman lying on the bed. A child was crawling over her. Raising its head, it stared unblinkingly into the light.

The mother was dead. On her wrist she wore a watch that had already stopped.

The baby looked about a year old. The place where Sonya and Slava found it was quite near where they lived but a long way from the infants' home.

Now, Sonya had once had an unhappy experience which made her very careful. The last baby she found had died in her arms while she was carrying it through the streets to Antonina Trofimovna.

"We'll take him home," said Sonya this time.

"Of course," Slava said. "We can give him some hot water to drink."

They met Sharapov in the yard. He stepped aside with a nod and looked with interest at the big bundle Sonya was carrying in her arms.

Slava could not resist the temptation to boast.

"Look what we've got!"

Sonya turned back the edge of the blanket and showed Sharapov the tiny senile face with its quivering lips.

Sharapov winced.

"Found it somewhere?"

Sonya nodded.

"Taking it to the infants' home? I heard you were looking for babies."

He looked into Sonya's eyes with a kind of shy admiration.

"This is the sixth!" said Slava. "It would be the seventh if that one hadn't died before we could get it there."

"What's this one called?" asked Sharapov.

"We don't know," said Slava. "They'll give it a name. At first they called them all Leningradsky and then they started giving them other names. Expect they'll call this one Sonin because it was Sonya who found him. There are quite a few Sonins there already though."

"Why are you taking it home?"

"We're going to heat some water and give him a drink."

"We've got a full kettle on the boil," exclaimed Sharapov. "You go on home. I'll bring you some hot water in a jiffy."

Sonya noticed that Sharapov was very excited and this pleased her. It was nice to have a grown-up, a military man, what was more, treating her as an equal, and even with a certain special respect which she could sense without altogether understanding, though it embarrassed her a little. She was glad when, a minute or two later, Sharapov burst into the room, panting and carrying a large kettle which gave off a curling cloud of steam.

The kitchen stove was still warm so they could unwrap the baby.

"Hold him," Sonya said to Sharapov. "We'll rewrap him."

Sharapov looked frightened but held out his hands and Sonya placed the baby on them. Sharapov was holding a baby for the first time in his life and he was terrified of making the slightest move in case he should hurt it. The baby boy suddenly started whimpering in a feeble little voice, which frightened Sharapov even more.

"Lift his head up a bit," said Sonya. "I'll be ready for him in a moment."

With deft movements she tore a sheet into a number of long strips and laid them out on her bed. Then she took the baby, which stopped crying immediately, unwrapped it and swaddled it tightly. When it had turned into a hard little white doll Sonya sat on the edge of the bed with the baby in her lap.

She poured some hot water into a glass. Sharapov took a piece of black rusk from his jacket pocket and handed it to her.

"D'you think he'll eat it?"

"We'll see," Sonya said and crumbled the rusk into the hot water.

She blew on every spoonful as she fed the baby. Slava and Sharapov were delighted to see how eagerly the baby ate the soft crumbs. When it opened its mouth they saw it had four teeth which rang loudly on the little spoon. The baby emptied the glass but then suddenly began to writhe and squirm, and burst into a howl.

"It's given him the gripes," said Sonya. "He hasn't eaten for too long."

Sharapov grew alarmed, especially when he noticed that Sonya, too, was frightened. They did not know what they ought to do in these circumstances and the shrieks of the writhing baby were torture to their ears. Sonya picked him up, pressed him to her face and started to breathe on his stomach through the swaddling clothes. Either that did the trick or the pains stopped of their own accord, for the baby suddenly calmed down, stopped crying and went to sleep.

Sonya wrapped him up in a blanket and carried him to the infants' home. She had to have a talk with Antonina Trofimovna and not only about the baby she and Slava had found. Another difficulty had just arisen on her path, one that was worrying her seriously. She had received some letters from her father and did not know how to answer them.

The letters came in a bundle, five at once. They had

been written at the end of November and during the first week of December after Sonya's father had learned from her of the death of his wife, Katerina Ilyinichna. Some of the letters were addressed to Sonya, others to her grandfather.

Sonya's father, Vsevolod Andreyevich, was on a part of the front very far from Leningrad, evidently somewhere round Voronezh. He knew that things were bad in Leningrad but had only the vaguest idea of what life was really like there. The news of his wife's death had shaken him badly. He simply could not understand why, if the Germans were so close to Leningrad, the family had not left the city. It was clear from his letters that he had been having a very hard time himself and was always fully occupied with vitally important things, but a feeling of acute anxiety about the fate of his family had haunted him day and night and whenever he had the opportunity he had sat down and scribbled a letter full of advice and questions. However, the questions were very difficult to answer and his advice was such that it was quite impossible to take.

For instance, he advised his family to sell his library and buy some sacks of potatoes in the suburbs; he begged them to address themselves for help to friends of his who had left Leningrad long before. He insisted they go anywhere as long as it was far from the front, but, at the same time, he was afraid of losing touch with them if they did take his advice and leave Leningrad. From the way he phrased his advice it was obvious that he considered his father-in-law a pretty helpless old man and Sonya little more than a child. His inability to help his family clearly filled him with an intolerable sense of anguish, and as she read his letters Sonya's eyes filled with tears of pity for her father.

She took the letters to Antonina Trofimovna and asked her how she ought to reply to them. Antonina Trofimovna read them attentively. The matter required thought. She

realized how painful it would be for Sonya's father to learn that his father-in-law had died of starvation and that the children remained quite alone in the famine-stricken city. What was the right thing to do? Not write at all? But that would be worse. Then he would think that Sonya and Slava had died. Perhaps to write without mentioning that the old man was dead.

But Sonya was against that. "No, I can't lie to him. Anyway, he'll find out about Grandad."

She must find some way of comforting her father. But how?

"I can't just write: 'Grandad has died, but everything is all right.' That's silly."

Her fingers fidgeted with the frayed, grubby sheets of paper covered with her father's big irregular handwriting.

That day was January 23, 1942. On the next day when Sonya went to the baker's and handed in her ration card she received nine ounces of bread instead of the usual four and a half.

At first she thought it was a mistake. Then, seeing smiling faces around her, she grasped what had happened.

"Is it really true?" she gabbled, still incredulous.

And everybody in the shop, the girls behind the counter and the customers, too, everybody around her nodded yes.

This was really something!

So the Ice Road brought Leningrad its first tangible gift.

And although the increase made very little difference, although the situation remained acutely grave, it was clear to all that a breach had been driven in the blockade and that the besieged city was no longer cut off from the rest of the country and that Hitler's plans were not working out.

Next day Antonina Trofimovna asked Sonya:

"Have you written to your father?"

"Yes," said Sonya.

"What did you tell him?"

"Everything. That we are alive and waiting for him."

By the beginning of February the road across Lake Ladoga had been so well organized that large numbers of people could start using it without any special danger. At last the evacuation of the civilian population of Leningrad which had stopped in August, six months before, was resumed. Lorries came across the lake from the east with loads of food and went back full of evacuees.

It was decided to evacuate gradually from Leningrad all those who were not required for the defence of the city. This had to be done as much for the sake of those who stayed behind as of the evacuees themselves. The less people there were in Leningrad the easier it would be to feed them.

The Leningrad evacuees got into trains at Finland Station, the trains crossed the Karelian Isthmus and took them to Cape Osinovets on the western shore of Lake Ladoga. There people were put in lorries and taken across the lake to Kobona, on the eastern shore. By this time the railway line had been extended to Kobona. There the evacuees were given hot meals and put in trains that bore them eastwards through Tikhvin, Cherepovets and Vologda.

One day Antonina Trofimovna said to Sonya:

"Well, you'll be able to do as your father wished. The infants' home is being sent to the Urals and you are to go with it as a nurse."

The question of evacuating children's institutions had been raised the moment the Ice Road was opened. The infants' home was given three days to make ready. All the staff was to go with the babies, even more than the usual number because extra hands were taken on in view of the difficulties of looking after the infants on so long a journey.

"Are you going, too?" Sonya asked Antonina Trofimovna.

"No," said Antonina Trofimovna. "I'm not going. You see, I'm connected with the district Party committee and not with the infants' home. They'll find something else for me to do when the home has left."

"Then I'm not going either," said Sonya.

"Oh, won't you?" said Antonina Trofimovna sternly. "And why not, pray?"

"I can't leave Slava behind."

"Why should you have to? He'll go with you, of course. In fact, that's another reason why you ought to go. You'll be all right with the infants' home, always have enough to eat."

"I'm afraid Slava won't want to leave. One of the airmen has promised to take him to the aerodrome."

"That's silly," said Antonina Trofimovna. "A lot of use he would be at an aerodrome."

"But you know how stubborn he can be. He's got it all fixed up. Even the division commissar has promised him."

"Oh, that's nothing. Now you go home and see you're both ready to leave."

Sonya said no more and went home. But after dark that evening she threw a shawl over her shoulders and hurried across the yard to Sharapov's flat. It was the first time she had been inside. She found Sharapov sitting at the table in the light of a small kerosene lamp. He had a ruler in his hand and was drawing up a table of calculations.

"Ah, it's you," he said. "Sit down, please."

Sonya sat down at the table. The yellow flame of the lamp danced in her dark eyes.

"It took me a long time to decide who to go to for advice," she said. "I decided to come to you."

And she told him that the infants' home was being evacuated.

"Shall I go with them or not?" she asked.

"Of course, you must go," Sharapov replied without an instant's hesitation.

Sonya sat looking at the lamp for several minutes. The yellow flame reflected in her dark eyes.

"I hoped you would advise me to stay," she said at length.

He tried to convince her that she ought to go. He advanced many arguments, each more weighty than the other. She listened to him in silence, raising no objections.

"Have you told Slava you intend taking him with you?" Sharapov asked.

"Not yet. If I told him now nothing in the world would make him consent. He's just living for the day when he will be sent to the aerodrome. I don't know how I'll get him to go. He'll run away, he'll hide somewhere."

Sharapov, of course, knew all Slava's plans well and had something to do with their fulfilment. He had often been present when Slava, constantly calling Lunin's consent to witness, had entreated Khovrin and Uvarov himself to let him join the air regiment. Uvarov had promised to send him to Lunin. At first Sharapov was not sure whether the division commissar had spoken seriously, and, to make certain, he had once asked Uvarov about it when they were alone. Uvarov, he discovered, had been quite serious.

"The lad's got to be fed somehow. He's a pitiful sight," Uvarov had said. "Against the regulations, eh? Never mind. Nobody'll hold *that* against us."

Now, however, the situation was quite different. The obvious thing to do was to let Slava and his sister leave together with the infants' home.

"I shall ask the division commissar to tell him he won't allow him to go to the station now," said Sharapov.

Sonya raised no objections but after a pause asked:

"Isn't the division commissar here now?"

"No."

"When is he coming back?"

"Tomorrow, or the day after."

Sonya said nothing more. Everything seemed to be settled.

Uvarov returned a few days later, towards evening, as it was growing dark. He sent Sharapov down into the yard to bring in some parcels of books from the car. Loaded with parcels, Sharapov was climbing the staircase when he heard a patter of quick, light steps behind him. He thought it was Slava and stopped. But it was Sonya—he could see her woollen shawl, white in the dusk.

"Just a minute, Comrade Sharapov."

She ran up the stairs, breathing fast. Turning to Sharapov she said in a whisper:

"I wanted to ask you.... Please don't say anything to your chief about Slava.... Let them send him to the aerodrome."

Sharapov stopped.

"Don't you want him to leave with you?"

"No, that's not it...." She faltered. "The home's already gone."

"Gone! When?"

"This morning."

"What about you, then?"

"I saw them off."

"So you refused to go?"

Sonya did not reply. Sharapov gave her a searching look, trying to read an answer in her eyes.

At that moment Uvarov, upstairs in the office, was talking to Khovrin, the editor of the division newspaper, who had been waiting for him in Sharapov's flat.

Uvarov had arrived in gay and lively mood. His eyes shone with excitement.

"D'you know where I've come from?" he asked Khovrin. "I've been with the Military Council of the Baltic Fleet. Guess what the news is."

Screwing up his cheerful eyes Uvarov paused to prolong the suspense. Then he said: "Proskuryakov's regiment is going to become a Guards regiment in a few days."

"You don't say so!"

Khovrin at once grasped the full significance of the

news. It was only quite recently that the practice of honouring certain units by calling them Guards had been introduced into the Red Army. Till now there were but few such units on the whole enormous front and they were units of legendary fame who had achieved some specially heroic and—the main thing—specially important task. And now a unit of their own division had won that honour!

"You and I shall leave together for Proskuryakov's regiment across the lake. Tomorrow morning," said Uvarov. "We'll attend the presentation of the Guards' colours to the regiment. I want you to write something there."

"For the paper?"

"No. Of course, you can write for the paper, too. You'll find plenty of material there. We'll be right in the thick of things. The Germans are having a smack at the road."

"Hard?"

"I should say so! They're only using aircraft at present, but they're bringing in more and more every day. They're bombing and strafing. Proskuryakov's regiment is in action every day. There haven't been such air battles since September." Hearing steps outside the door, Uvarov called, "Sharapov!"

Sharapov hurried in.

"Go to that lad," said Uvarov. "Tell him to get ready to leave. I'll take him to Lunin at the station tomorrow."

2

On arriving at the air station Khovrin and Slava settled in the cottage beside the forked birch-tree. They had been directed there when, getting out of the car, they had asked for Lunin's place.

Behind a brightly-coloured curtain they found Lunin's bed with his suitcase pushed under it. But there was nobody in except the deaf and taciturn landlady. Lunin and Serov had not been seen there for five days.

The two fighter-pilots were again in action. The three remaining aircraft of Two Squadron—Rassokhin's, Lunin's and Serov's—had come out of the repair-shops as two. Lunin and Serov spent their nights in the dug-out near the runway and from dawn on were on duty in the cockpits of their planes. A flare would sparkle in the sky and the two planes would take off, leaving behind them a trail of glittering snow dust. Their shadows would still be crossing the snow-clad airfield when Senior Lieutenant Tararaksin, the duty operations officer, was reporting to the division that Two Squadron was airborne.

The planes flew very low over the bare hill. That had become a custom. It was a way of saluting Rassokhin. A grey jagged-edged boulder lying on their comrade's grave flashed past below the planes. Lunin and Serov, with the help of their mechanics, had dragged this boulder to the place a few days after the funeral, and now it caught the eye of everyone taking off or landing at the station. The wind swept the snow off the top of the hill and the boulder remained visible even after the heaviest snow-falls.

Beyond the hill they gathered height and flew along the branch railway line leading to Kobona, which had been completed only a few days before. The higher they went the broader became their view of the great lake ahead of them. They crossed its shore over Kobona. Far below they could see, as cleary as in the transparent depths of a pond, tiny cottages, railway vans, fussy little locomotives and the shadows of their smoke undulating over the sparkling snow. Down there in Kobona women and children who had been brought across the frozen lake were being transferred to trains. Lunin and Serov circled over Kobona and made a careful examination of the whole sky around. And then Kobona, too, slipped away behind them and from horizon to horizon there was nothing to be seen but the white snow-sheet of the lake. They flew on, keeping the bluish line of forest to the south in sight. That was where the Germans were.

The white surface of the lake was crossed by the straight line of the Ice Road. The planes did not fly directly over the road but the pilots had it in sight nearly all the time. From east to west went a flow of supplies and munitions and in the opposite direction moved people. The planes banked and flew northwards. The south shore melted behind them, and with it the road, and now there was nothing to be seen below except the snow-sheet, boundless, glittering, and quite dead. They held to their course until they saw, far ahead, a tiny snow-covered islet, distinguishable among the ice only because of a toy-like lighthouse projecting from it. This was Sukho. As soon as they sighted it Lunin and Serov turned sharply. They flew on to the estuary of the Volkhov, turned again over Novaya Ladoga and returned to base, not neglecting to dip low over the bare hill where Rassokhin lay as they came in to land.

They had become as accustomed to this route as they had been to the one over Marquis Pool, between Leningrad, Kronstadt and Peterhof. Of course, they managed to complete the whole route only when they had no skirmishes with Messerschmitts. And these skirmishes were becoming more frequent. They rarely flew without meeting opposition.

When the German high command discovered that hundreds of thousands of civilians were being systematically evacuated from Leningrad, it threw all the aircraft it had in the Leningrad region into an attempt to harass transport along the Ice Road.

Every day the Messerschmitts grew more intrusive.

They chased lorries on the Ice Road, strafing the drivers; they tried to intercept the transport planes flying across the lake to Leningrad and back; they shot up the streets and the newly built railway line at Kobona, driving people who had just arrived from Leningrad into the deep snow of the forest, and hindering the unloading of goods trains; out in the middle of the lake they attacked columns of labourers armed with nothing but shovels, quite defence-

less on the bare ice, and they always started skirmishes with Soviet fighter-planes, evidently hoping to overpower them and so leave the Ice Road without air cover.

But during these skirmishes the Nazi pilots did not show themselves to be particularly persistent or skilful. Evidently they were no longer the airmen of six months before. Literally not.

The chief thing that Lunin had learned during his months of active service was the art of sizing up his opponent at once. One movement was enough for him to distinguish the greenhorn who had never fired a shot and was going into action with his heart in his mouth from the experienced pilot who placed too high a value on his own life and who wanted a show, not a fight, and a quick break-away in the end. Lunin was a more skilful pilot than most of the German pilots he encountered, and, knowing this, he always tried to engage them in the most difficult conditions for manoeuvring—over the tree-tops or even between the sloping banks of rivers. He knew that in such circumstances his opponent would falter and hesitate and that then the "kill" was a certainty.

Nor did it take him long to recognize the experienced feinters, despite all their apparent belligerency and impetuosity. It was precisely their demonstrative belligerency that betrayed them. Lunin knew well that victory belonged to those who were not afraid of risking their lives for it. That was the way Rassokhin had come out the victor when he had hurled his six planes against dozens of Junkers and Messerschmitts. Sensing that he had Serov, and Serov alone, on his tail and seeing before him eight, ten, twelve Messerschmitts, Lunin made it abundantly clear to the Germans that he was prepared to sacrifice himself in order to bring down at least one of them. The Germans realized that at once. And, as they were not at all prepared to take the same risk for the sake of bringing him down, the battle, despite the enemy's numerical superiority, would turn into a series of spins and intricate turns with bursts of fire from

a respectable distance. This was the kind of thing—imponderable in itself—which is often called having better morale than the enemy.

One day the wind had veered to the west early in the morning, warming the air and bringing a heavy fall of snow. It was one of the few days that February when it was almost impossible to fly, but it was that very day four Messerschmitts chose to behave with astonishing cheek. They began by strafing a train going to Kobona, slightly damaging the locomotive and wounding two railway workers.

In clear weather the Messerschmitts did not risk attacking the railway line; they usually kept to a height of eight or nine thousand feet and only watched the movement of the trains. They took advantage of the snow for their attack, calculating on being safe in those flying conditions. The attack was immediately reported at the station and, within a few minutes of the shooting-up of the train, Lunin and Serov were airborne.

They could see nothing but falling snow. Even the forest below was practically invisible, although Lunin tried to fly as low as possible in order not to miss the railway line. Serov's prop was almost grazing his tail—he had only to fall back some twenty yards to lose sight of Lunin altogether. They should have reached the railway line after four minutes' flying but almost five minutes had passed and there was no sign of the track. Lunin turned back. Once more they flew over the railway without noticing it. Lunin realized there was no hope of meeting the Messerschmitts in such conditions. They could pass within a few yards of each other without making contact. But he was put out by the fact that he had not found even the railway line. He stubbornly went on looking for it. He hedgehopped four or five times, first left, then right, but without a glimpse of the narrow cutting through the forest along which the railway line ran. Every minute the snow fell

more heavily and he could see nothing but a screen of flakes.

Lunin noticed that to the northwest, over the lake, the sky looked a little brighter, so he headed that way. He decided to look for the railway from the Kobona direction. They followed the coastline as far as Kobona and at once picked up the railway track. It really was a little lighter here and the snow was falling less thickly. When they reached the railway they turned southwards, flying low, so as not to lose sight of it. They overtook a locomotive puffing along steadily from Kobona—it was probably hurrying to replace the one that had been damaged. A minute later they reached the damaged engine but it lay out of sight in the cloud of vapour that was escaping through the holes in its boiler. The train was a long one, made up of passenger carriages, goods vans, open trucks and petrol tanks. There were groups of people standing in the snow near the passenger carriages.

The Messerschmitts, of course, were no longer to be seen—it would have been futile to look for them there. And, feeling quite certain that he was not going to find them that day, Lunin headed for the station.

The continual flashing of the snow before his eyes began to tire him. He felt blinded and dazed. No sooner had he left the railway line than he again lost his bearings and flew at random. This worried him a little—he realized it might be harder to find the airfield than it had been to find the railway. It was so easy to overshoot the place. He felt relieved when he suddenly caught sight of the top of the bare hill above the pine-trees.

He all but skimmed Rassokhin's grave and came in to land over the loose snow of the airfield. As he stretched out his hand to release the undercarriage he looked down and saw several mechanics racing across the snow. There seemed something odd about the way they were running. He turned his head and saw a Messerschmitt on his right moving in to shoot up the station.

Without losing a moment Lunin turned, shot under the Messerschmitt at the risk of touching the ground, climbed and let loose a burst of fire into the Messerschmitt's belly. His hands and feet moved so rapidly that his reflexes seemed to be outpacing his mind. As he tore under the enemy plane and went on gaining height he noticed six aircraft of his regiment standing in the snow near the edge of the airfield, near the forest. A Messerschmitt was diving towards them. Of course, that must be a second Messerschmitt, not the one he had just fired at. Lunin was furious at the idea of an attack on the aircraft—there were so few of them left. Slashing the planes on the ground with fire, the Messerschmitt came out of its dive and began to rise, and Lunin saw that Serov was on its tail. But behind Serov zoomed another Messerschmitt. That made three! Lunin made for the third Messerschmitt and tried to get it in his gun sights.

He saw the faint flash of tracers passing him and realized that he, too, was being fired at. At first he thought it was the first Messerschmitt. But then he noticed a column of smoke being tossed by the wind in the middle of the airfield. No, he had downed that one; it was a fourth that was after him now. So these were the four Messerschmitts that had strafed the train twenty minutes ago. Had they been looking for the station or had they come across it by accident in the snow-storm?

Serov turned, shook off the fire of his pursuer and attacked the plane that was chasing Lunin. The five aircraft, twisting and spinning, were carried through the falling snow over the airfield, chasing each other and exchanging short bursts of fire.

The German pilots were assertive and clever but Lunin felt they would have been glad to disengage. The sight of that burning plane in the middle of the airfield had knocked some of the fight out of them. All the same, they wanted to even the score and, besides, they were three against two. Lunin and Serov, however, attacked so per-

sistently that they had no opportunity of taking advantage of their numbers. When the Germans finally decided to make off they were not allowed to. Serov flew past the bare hill, melted out of sight for a moment in the falling snow and, reappearing suddenly, launched a flank attack over the forest on a Messerschmitt just as it was withdrawing from the skirmish. The Messerschmitt lurched and slid slowly down into the trees. The two remaining Messerschmitts shot off in different directions and were soon out of sight.

Landing his plane and springing out of the cockpit on to the snow Lunin, who was bathed in sweat, tore off his helmet and opened his tunic to bare his chest. He was dressed over-warmly for such headlong fighting at so low an altitude—and on such a mild day, too. Major Proskuryakov was waiting for him beside the plane. Lunin drew himself up and had started to report to the major. But the major would not let him.

"That's all right, Konstantin Ignatyevich, I saw it all myself. . . ."

The air battle had been watched in all its details by the entire station: airmen, mechanics, Red Navy men, drivers, the military clerks of the combat units, the cooks. They knew more about the battle than Lunin did himself because they had seen it all, while he had had only momentary glimpses of the plane he held in his sights. Only one man had seen nothing and that was Senior Lieutenant Tararaksin. He could not tear himself away from his telephones; but he already knew more than anybody else from the reports he had been sending through to the division and to Air Headquarters.

"What about the people and the aircraft?" Lunin asked. "Are they all right?"

It turned out that the damage inflicted by the Messerschmitts during their attack was quite insignificant. They had managed to do nothing serious. There were no casual-

ties and the planes on the snow had received no more than a few bullet holes which were quickly patched.

The Messerschmitt in the middle of the airfield went on burning for a long time, until dusk fell; for ten paces around the snow was melted. The heat was so intense that the German pilot's body was burned to ashes. Next day the mechanics found among the remains of the fuselage a blackened Iron Cross.

The search for the second Messerschmitt, which Serov had brought down, was undertaken by quite an expedition consisting of Dr. Gromeko and some Red Navy men off duty. When they entered the forest Gromeko, thinking the pilot might be hiding somewhere among the trees, drew his revolver. But they found the German dead, sitting in his plane with a bullet hole in his head. His plane turned out to be only slightly damaged and it would probably not have crashed if Serov had not killed the pilot.

None of the air battles Lunin and Serov had fought ever brought them such fame as this encounter over the airfield which the whole ground staff of the regiment had seen with their own eyes. There was something new in the glances that followed Lunin and Serov and in the silence that greeted their approach.

Lunin was astonished to learn that most of the people who had watched the fight from the ground thought he and Serov had been in great danger. In the heat of the action it had never occurred to him that the fight might end badly for either of them.

In the very next encounter, however, he was quite sure for a few moments that he would be killed.

It had been snowing all night, but the morning was clear and frosty. The whole world under its fresh coating of snow was wrapped in fluid blue shadows of varying density. Lunin and Serov took off. A great sweep of country opened up before them as they climbed. There was not a trace of mist in the air and they could see clearly almost the whole length of the Ice Road from one end to the other. At three

thousand yards they flattened out on their usual course and were just approaching Sukho Island when they spotted puffs of ack-ack fire behind them over Kobona. They turned sharply and dashed for Kobona.

There were Messerschmitts over Kobona, glinting in the sun as they banked. About six of them. They were shooting the place up. From a distance it looked like a huge wheel turning vertically. Messerschmitt after Messerschmitt dived down as if to peck at the earth, then soared up to complete the circle and come down for another peck.

Spotting Lunin and Serov from a distance, they stopped diving and climbed to attack them.

To escape the concentrated fire of four Messerschmitts Lunin resorted to a series of rapid and extremely complicated aerobatics that ended in his taking too tight a turn and falling suddenly into a spin. He was not worried by the spin, for he had plenty of height to pull his plane out of it. But as he whirled down to earth he saw a Messerschmitt following him very skilfully with the obvious intention of killing him as he came out of the spin.

Lunin knew that when he pulled out of his spin he would for a few long moments be completely at the Messerschmitt's mercy, and the knowledge made him want to go on spinning until his plane hit the ice. He was overwhelmed by a feeling of the inevitability of death.

But his hands and feet, the hands and feet of a man who had been flying aircraft for twenty years, did their work mechanically and pulled the plane out of its spin. And just at the moment when Lunin was helpless no one fired at him. Serov had noticed what was happening and, shaking off his attackers, had hurled himself at the plane that was pursuing Lunin. And at that moment the fight ended, for Major Proskuryakov already had his six aircraft in the air and was approaching Kobona, and the Messerschmitts, seeing them, made off to the southwest. But it was a long time before Lunin could forget the sensation of imminent death that he had experienced in that battle.

3

Khovrin and Slava were welcomed by all, for with them came Uvarov, and the news that the regiment was soon to receive Guards colours. This news made a deep impression; in every dug-out and cottage the men received it with quiet enthusiasm. In the mess people tried to get used to the new, unusual and formal-sounding titles like "Comrade Guards Lieutenant, pass me the mustard, please," or "You've left your tobacco-pouch on the table, Comrade Guards Captain." Some would even refer to "Hilda of the Guards." The regiment chief of staff, Captain Shakhbazyan, hung up in the H.Q. dug-out a large sheet of paper on which was written in coloured pencil the record of the regiment since the beginning of the war:

Number of enemy aircraft shot down	139
Of which:	
Bombers	62
Fighters	59
Reconnaissance and spotting aircraft	18

Every visitor to the dug-out stood a long time looking at this chart. Senior Lieutenant Tararaksin would lay down the telephone receiver and explain:

"One hundred and thirty-nine aircraft is almost five air regiments of the size ours was at the outbreak of the war."

There was only one thing about it the airmen did not like—the figure 139 was not a round sum.

"We ought to down another one before the banner is presented," said Serov. "Must bring it up to one hundred and forty."

Everybody agreed.

When Lunin heard that Slava had arrived, and that he

had moved into the cottage, he felt worried. He could not possibly leave the station before evening and he feared that the lad might be left with nothing to eat and that probably no one had bothered to light the stove for him. It was quite dark when he finally managed to run to the village and look into the cottage. He found the stove alight, the cottage warm. Slava lay sleeping on Serov's bed and Khovrin was sitting in his shirt-sleeves at the table writing something by the light of a small lamp.

Khovrin stood up and greeted Lunin with a smile. And although they had met only twice before, Lunin felt that this man, with his gaunt parchment-coloured face, was really glad to see him. Lunin was glad, too, more than he expected to be. Everything they had in common—the locomotive, the lorry with the bumping tank, the pass they had obtained for that woman with the children—meant a lot to him. The two men shook hands and stood for several moments smiling, not knowing how to open the conversation. Lunin explained that he had dropped in because he had felt anxious about Slava.

"You needn't have been," said Khovrin. "They've taken care of him without us."

Khovrin was quite right. There was not a soul at the station who would not have done everything possible to see that Slava was fed and made comfortable. He was the boy from Leningrad, a hungry little lad snatched from the jaws of death. He had no idea himself how violent an emotional storm his haggard little face evoked in the hearts of all those people around him. The mechanics drew him into their cottage and plied him with food. They themselves had been hungry enough at the beginning of the winter at various Leningrad air stations and, now that they had ample, everyone wanted the boy to eat at least a little of his own rations. And Slava ate: he did not know the meaning of the word "replete," he had long ago forgotten that a human being could be in a state when he did not feel hungry. Tinned meat went the same way as tinned

vegetables; he gobbled down slices of bread and butter, cold ham and kippers. Then Uvarov came for him. Slava began by asking to be allowed to go to the station to see the aircraft and look for Lunin, but Uvarov told him he would have to eat first, and took him into the air-crew mess where they were joined by Proskuryakov and Yermakov. For the cooks and waitresses the arrival of the half-starved boy was as great an event as it had been for the mechanics. In spite of the presence of the division commissar himself they crowded in the door of the mess and cast fond glances at Slava. The plates they brought him from the kitchen were piled to the edge with food that represented more calories than any norm required. Slava ate everything with the untroubled conscience of a man who believes there is no such thing in the world as repletion. The feast would undoubtedly have ended badly had Yermakov, the regiment commissar, not intervened. This man of rather dry but judicious nature had more perspicacity than the others, and was the first to notice that Slava was heading for danger. Drawing the boy's plate away from under his nose he said: "That'll do!"

Slava had planned to go to the station after dinner but the moment the meal was over he felt an overpowering desire to sleep. The long motor drive in the cold air followed by this unaccustomed amount of food combined to make him fall off to sleep there at the table, and to sleep so soundly that nothing could awaken him. In the end Hilda had to put his hat and coat on for him while he was sound asleep and Yermakov carried him in his arms to the cottage where Khovrin was sitting, and laid him on Serov's bed. The boy slept so soundly that for several hours he did not even stir. During that time, however, his career advanced rapidly. He was mobilized, enrolled as a Red Navy man in the air station battalion, given a ration and detailed for work in the clothing stores.

Lunin was in a hurry to get to regiment headquarters. He had little time for conversation with Khovrin.

"Well, how did you get on? That last time . . ." Khovrin asked him. "Did you get them through?"

"Yes, I managed it all right," Lunin replied with a frown.

Khovrin sensed his reluctance to speak about the woman with the children whom in Leningrad Lunin had referred to as his wife, and said no more.

"What are you writing there?" Lunin asked. "Something for the paper?"

"No, it's not for the paper," replied Khovrin. "Uvarov has asked me to write something but I'm finding it hard to do. Keep crossing out."

Indeed, the table was littered with crumpled sheets of paper covered with scribbles.

"Why, that's not like you," said Lunin. "I don't believe it."

"It's true, all the same. I've been writing for hours and nothing to show for it."

Next morning, Lunin took Slava to the clothing stores where he was to work. To reach the stores they had to go along practically the whole length of the village street. They strode out over the dry crisp snow. At first Slava skipped on ahead, as usual, but soon he began to lag behind and Lunin had to pause and wait for him to catch up. The lad, usually so lively and unafraid, was now somewhat subdued. His cheeks had even paled a little and the nearer they approached the stores the slower did his legs move.

"Do I have to say: 'Reporting for duty'?" he asked.

"You do," said Lunin.

"Won't you come in with me, Konstantin Ignatyevich? Oh, please do."

Outside the building used as the clothing stores paced a girl on sentry duty, clad in a knee-length sheepskin and high felt boots, with an automatic rifle slung across her chest. The whole unit in charge of the air station clothing stores consisted of Komsomol girls. They all came from the Urals and were short of build, stocky, all about eight-

een years old, and all volunteers who had joined up at the end of 1941. They were directly subordinate to Sergeant Zina, a tall, rather thin young woman with a stern expression.

Lunin and Slava entered the house. Catching sight of Lunin, Sergeant Zina sprang to her feet and standing at her table swept her arm to her right temple in a magnificent salute, bringing the heels of her boots together with a sharp click. Slava's "Reporting for duty" sounded very indistinct. But Zina had been fully briefed about him by Yermakov and he had no need to explain things himself.

"The first thing is to get you properly dressed," she said.

Behind the table heaps of black greatcoats, pea-jackets and trousers towered to the ceiling. From these heaps, girls' faces, round and rosy-ckeeked, peeped at Slava with lively curiosity.

Having received instructions from Sergeant Zina, the girls, eagerly set about finding for Slava all the clothes to which a Red Navy man was entitled. They found for him the smallest vest, the smallest pair of pants, the smallest pair of boots, the shortest of trousers and the narrowest of pea-jackets. All these things had been lying for months in the stores without anybody taking them and no one could understand for whom they could have been made. The girls thought they would never be of any use to anybody and were delighted to find someone who needed them. But even they were too big for Slava and had to be taken in and shortened. Slava stood in front of a mirror while the girls, their mouths full of pins, needle and scissors in hand, shuffled around him on their knees. Sergeant Zina supervised their work.

"The pet! He's a real little pet," the girls gushed as they spun him round.

Slava frowned to keep his dignity. He looked at himself in the mirror with some satisfaction for he made a brave and manly sight in his sailor's uniform, with its blue

collar and black trousers and that splendid belt with an anchor on the buckle. What a pity they could not issue him a real sailor's cap now; however, the black winter hat with ear-flaps and the red star on it looked fine and he would get the other one in the spring. It took only a few minutes for him to feel quite at ease; his timidity had vanished, and his cautious looks were reserved for Sergeant Zina. When Lunin left the stores Slava was still standing in front of the mirror, his trousers full of pins, a ring of girls around him. It was decided he should spend the night at Lunin's cottage.

And so a new life began for Slava. He did not find the work hard: all he had to do was to move piles of caps from one place to another and count shirts. Nothing very interesting in that, of course. But he did the job carefully and with a certain amount of ceremony. Uvarov had told him that he had only been sent to the clothing stores temporarily, just as a start, and that was something he found most encouraging. He made close friends with the girls, treating them quite as equals and using his fists on them when they pulled him about too much. Three times a day he marched with them to the naval mess for breakfast, dinner and supper. His place in the line was on the extreme left although, in his opinion, one of the girls was not an inch taller than he, and the only reason he did not protest was because he didn't like starting a row. He ate everything that was put in front of him with undiminished zest, but when the girls offered him, the Leningrader, some of their own helpings of soup or gruel he refused out of pride. He obeyed Zina's commands but with a glum look. When she ordered him to do something he did not like he would mutter to himself: "Zina's getting meaner," a phrase of his own invention that he found extremely caustic.

But none of that was frightfully exciting. He had come to the air station for the sake of the aircraft and it was aircraft that lay in the centre of his attention.

The house used as clothing stores was divided into two sections—one heated, the other cold. On the heated side the girls lived and there, too, was the table at which Zina did all the mysterious operations of the accounts. Clothes were issued and fittings made there. Most of the stores were kept in the cold half of the building. At the back of the cold half there was a small window in the wall, which could be reached only by wriggling on one's belly through a heap of greatcoats. This little window commanded a view of the entire air station from the village to the foot of the bare hill.

The girls showed Slava this window at which they sometimes lay stretched out on the coats. But though they had spent fully two months at the station the girls knew much less about aircraft than Slava and would not keep on looking at them as long as he. Slava could spend hour after hour lying at the little window in the cold store-room. When he felt chilly he would bury himself in the coats.

What he saw from that window was the most interesting thing in the world. He saw how from time to time Captain Shakhbazyan would come out of the dug-out of the command post, carrying a huge pistol from which he would fire a coloured flare. He saw how, as the flare curved through the air, planes tore down the snowy runway to take off and disappear beyond the bare hill. He saw the air strip, the dark T-shaped mark for landing, against the snow and, standing beside it, Proskuryakov, Yermakov, Dr. Gromeko and the mechanics of the planes that had taken off. He saw the planes coming in to land, saw them touch down, their slip-stream whisking up whirlwinds of snow, saw them bounce lightly to get the feel of the ground once more and then taxi across the snow slower and slower. He saw how the mechanics rushed to meet them and, as they slowed down, seized the wings and guided them up to the regiment commander. And then came that solemn moment when the pilot shot back the hood and clambered out to make his report to Proskuryakov. From the window in the store-

room the aircraft looked tiny and the black figures moved like toy soldiers against the snow. But Slava unerringly distinguished one figure from another and understood everything that was going on, and when he did not understand his imagination filled in the gaps.

But, of course, he could not be satisfied with observing the station through the window. He had to see and hear everything from close at hand. When he found there was nothing for him to do at the stores—which was often—he would go up to Zina and ask:

"May I dismiss, Comrade Sergeant?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Zina would reply after a moment's reflection. "Don't be late for dinner though. Hey!" she would shout after him, "have you got your snow-boots on? Be careful."

Slava was quite wrong to make fun of Zina and mutter rude things about her under his breath. Though she was strict with the girls in her charge she was very lenient with him. She literally guarded the girls, trying not to let them out of her sight for a moment. She assumed that here at the air station they were in danger of losing their hearts any minute. Slava, however, was immune to that eventuality, so she let him run about freely. "Let him get around," she said to herself. "A breath of fresh air will do him good."

She had only to say yes and Slava would be out in a flash, in case she changed her mind. Darting through the door and running round the side of the house he would make straight for the airfield. The cold wind would make him gasp for breath; he would screw up his eyes against the bright light. What he liked best was to be overtaken by the petrol truck with the words "Danger, Inflammable" written on it in big letters. When he saw it coming along the smooth road to the air station he would thumb it. The driver would slow down and he would leap on to the step as it rumbled by. Clinging on to the frame of the broken window of the cabin door and glancing out of the corner

of his eye at the grimy face of the driver, he would ride jauntily up to the runway. He would recognize Lunin sitting in the cockpit of his plane from far off and, jumping down from the step of the truck, would run straight to him.

Slava knew every airman in the regiment but Lunin he had known first and, for that reason, attached himself to Two Squadron. He could at once distinguish whose plane was taking off and he would find out from the mechanics whose turn it was to fly next. The helmeted fighter-pilots sitting high above him in their planes smiled down at him. They were bored waiting for missions and the sight of him distracted them. Lunin allowed him to climb up on to the wing of his aircraft. Standing on the wing, which was dotted with patches where bullet holes had been repaired, Slava would look into the cockpit. Lunin pointed out the controls and explained their function. Once he even climbed out of the cockpit and let Slava take his place. Standing on the wing he let Slava hold the stick and peep through the sights. Slava sat in the cockpit petrified with joy. He kept his hands carefully away from the gun trigger, afraid of touching it inadvertently.

"Go on, press it," Lunin said suddenly.

Not believing his ears, Slava turned and looked at Lunin. No, Lunin was not pulling his leg. Pale with ecstasy Slava pressed the trigger. There was a sharp crack and a glittering line of tracers crossed the empty airfield. Slava snatched away his hand and looked at Lunin again. Lunin smiled all over his ruddy chapped face.

In spite of his thoroughly serious attitude towards meals Slava did not have the will-power to drag himself away from the airfield for the sake of dinner. Sergeant Zina had to summon him time after time. She would come and stand near the stores and wave her hand. Slava would pretend not to notice her but Lunin would see her at once and say:

"Time to go, Slava. You can't keep people waiting."

Slava would run off to Zina looking sulky. After a few paces he would turn and shout to Lunin:

"I'll ask for permission to come back after dinner."

He would dash through his dinner and with his mouth full solemnly tell the girls the latest news from the station. The girls would enviously hang on his every word.

And there really was something to feel envious about!

All that glorious heroic world of flights and air battles in which the girls took only an indirect part, and which they could watch only from afar through their little window in the cold part of the stores—all that Slava could watch from close at hand, he had the key to it. Slava was aware of their envy and, of course, it made him swagger a little and put on airs. In his accounts of events on the airfield he used various terms picked up from the mechanics, words like longeron, fuselage, and stabilizer, and smiled disdainfully when the girls asked him what they meant. He peppered his accounts of air battles with so much airman's slang that the girls understood very little of what had happened. Lunin he called Konstantin Ignatyevich and Serov he referred to as Kolya and sometimes even as Kolka.

Gulping down the second course and chewing his last piece of bread, he would dart impatient glances every few seconds at Zina.

"Oh, be off with you!" she would say. "But you'll have to remember to come to supper. I'm not going to call you. If you're late, you'll go without."

During supper he would have considerably less to say for himself and would even be caught yawning from fatigue. His eyelids would droop. Strolling back from the mess to the cottage beside the forked birch-tree he would almost fall asleep on his feet and bump into passers-by.

In the evenings he would find not only Khovrin but Lunin in the cottage.

Lunin now went every evening after supper to sit for an hour or two with Khovrin round the table with the lamp on it. It was warm in the cottage and Lunin enjoyed

it after a whole day in the cold. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead, which looked bigger because of his baldness; he would sit with the zipper of his flying suit pulled down and watch Khovrin with his kindly eyes.

Lunin spoke little. Khovrin was far more talkative. They were both engaged now on the job Uvarov had originally given Khovrin to do. Slava knew what it was: they were writing the words of the oath for the airmen to take at the ceremony of presenting the Guards colours.

Khovrin had already composed ten versions but Uvarov had turned them all down, one after another.

"They all sound very splendid but they don't ring true," he said. "You've got to write with more restraint. Do it so that a man forgets he's repeating something he has learned by heart, so that he thinks they're his own words about something he's lived through, something he values more than anything else in the world. But I can see you'll never manage it on your own; you need a real pilot to help you. Ask Lunin to give you a hand when you see him. Read all your versions to him and hear what he has to say."

Lunin listened and at first praised the lot. Quite sincerely, apparently. He was captivated by Khovrin's art in handling words and in finding the right phrase. It made him laugh to hear that Uvarov had suggested he could be of any help. The very idea of it! Nevertheless Khovrin sensed that none of his versions pleased Lunin.

"That's overdoing it," Lunin would say. "Fighter-pilots don't talk that way."

"How do they talk?"

"I don't know. A bit less fancy, though. You want something about the stick, about the magneto. . . ."

Khovrin would jump up and pace the room, his stooping frame casting a shadow on the walls. He would look Lunin hard in the eyes in an attempt to plumb his feelings. And every time he thought of a phrase he would read it out and ask, "How's that?"

"That's more like it," Lunin would reply. "Not quite right but something like it."

Slava paid no particular attention to what the men were talking about and failed to grasp what it was all about. Every evening, the moment he got into bed, a longing to be with Sonya came over him.

During the day-time there were so many impressions pouring in on him that he had no time to think of his sister, but when he lay down and shut his eyes, she seemed to rise before him in the semi-darkness. Sonya was now living all by herself in the kitchen where Grandad had died, alone in that cold empty flat. He saw her putting the kettle on to boil and sipping a glass of warm water in the dusk. All her bread ration had gone, of course: she had eaten that in the morning and now she had nothing left, nothing....

"Comrade Khovrin," he asked eagerly, "will you take a parcel to my sister for me?"

"Of course," said Khovrin. "I told you I would."

Slava had been dreaming of sending Sonya that parcel since his first day at the station. He began by trying to eat less bread himself and making rusks of what he saved. But the waitresses told him that anyway he was not eating all his bread ration and that he could count on a loaf or two any time to send to his sister, and some cereals, too, and maybe a tin of meat or vegetables. Whether the bread was from his own rations or the mess staff intended to get the two loaves from some other source was not certain, but Slava firmly believed it would be his own.

"D'you think Sonya could come here to see me, Konstantin Ignatyevich? Not now, of course, but later on, say in the spring. I can see it's early to raise it with Uvarov now—he would be angry—but a little later, what d'you think? So she could come here, just for a day or two. Will you ask him?"

"Go to sleep," said Lunin. "I'll mention it."

A moment later Slava was off on another tack.

"What d'you think, Konstantin Ignatyevich?" he said. "Will they shoot down another Fritzy and make a round hundred and forty?"

"I don't know. Go to sleep."

And Slava fell off to sleep.

Lunin was one of the few people at the air station who were not particularly worried that one hundred and thirty-nine was not a round figure. It was a matter of age, probably, for he noticed that the younger a man was the more enthusiastically he dreamed that the regiment would bring up the score to a round one hundred and forty before the presentation ceremony. Lunin had not the slightest doubt that the hundred and fortieth German plane would be shot down soon, but whether that happened a day before or a day after the ceremony was something about which he could not care less. However, when he came out of the cottage and noted that the frost was sharper and the stars shone more brightly, he realized the next day was going to be brilliantly clear and they would have to be in the air from dawn, and there would probably be some fighting, and that, in all probability, meant that the hundred and fortieth German aircraft would be shot down on the very next day.

He was right about the flying. They were in the air at the crack of dawn. Various observation posts reported spotting Messerschmitts. The enemy were flying in small groups, keeping very high, and appearing over the railway, over Kobona and over the Ice Road. They were not going in for strafing, and were evidently anxious to avoid Soviet fighters.

The regiment's eight aircraft took off in pairs and patrolled their whole region, and they returned to base without a single skirmish, although two or four Messerschmitts were in sight somewhere in the sky all the time. This, of course, was no mere accident. The Germans had something cooking.

There had never been such brilliant flying weather.

Despite twenty degrees of frost the dazzling sunshine gave a palpable hint of spring. It was impossible to look in the direction of the sun: your eyes shut involuntarily from the dazzle. This complicated the task of the fighter-pilots, for though the air was transparently clear, as soon as the Messerschmitts got the sun behind them, they would suddenly melt to nothing in the glare.

The sun was particularly troublesome towards the end of the afternoon, just before it went down, when Lunin and Serov were out on their fourth patrol. The fiery ball hung low in the south-west, bathing half the firmament in its pallid flames, and there was no telling what was happening within those flames.

But as it happened this fiery curtain helped Lunin and Serov and not the Germans. They were in the extreme south-western corner of their patrol area when, to the north-east, they sighted nine Junkers flying in line ahead to bomb Kobona.

The Junkers were flying at about nine thousand feet. Still higher, and a little farther north-east, their cover of Messerschmitts was flying on a parallel course. The time of the raid had been well chosen—the planes could not be seen from Kobona, for they were flying straight out of the sun. But for the same reason the Germans themselves could not see Lunin and Serov. The clumsy Junkers with their heavy bomb-loads bumbled along confidently within two thousand yards of them, without suspecting a thing. Lunin's heart thumped with excitement. He wobbled his wings to signal to Serov and they zoomed into the attack together.

Rassokhin had taught them last autumn how to shoot down Junkers, enormous, slow and unmanoeuvrable planes as compared with their own. The line of Junkers wavered and broke. Soon two of them were shrouded in smoke on the ice.

One hundred and forty-one, another odd number, Lunin thought and smiled to himself.

The seven remaining Junkers were in no sort of formation now and were flying off in various directions. The bombs they had unloaded to facilitate their escape burst far below on the white snow-sheet of the lake.

The Messerschmitts were circling at random, when they saw the two Junkers being shot down but could not spot the Soviet fighters. For safety's sake Lunin and Serov flew south-westward straight into the sun. They crossed the shore of the lake and flew over the dark bristly forest. Suddenly Lunin, blinded by the glare, sensed something dark looming up ahead of him. Masking the sun for a split second, a Messerschmitt hurtled towards him. It flashed past and was already far behind.

Why didn't he shoot at me? Lunin asked himself with a shudder. He suddenly thought of Serov. Where was he?

He turned and looked back.

Serov's aircraft was in flames.

The flames enveloped it completely. Even in this blinding sunshine they looked bright. The amazing thing was that the plane continued to fly on its course.

Lunin felt himself shouting. His voice was drowned by the engine, but he went on shouting desperately.

Suddenly, at a height of six thousand feet, Serov baled out.

Twisting and turning, and waving his arms in a strange way, he fell earthwards.

He did not open his parachute and Lunin thought it was all up with him. Still shouting at the top of his voice Lunin followed Serov down in a vertical dive, as if he meant to finish up with Serov among the trees. And Serov continued on his headlong fall and just as swiftly dropped to the horizon the crimson ball of the swelling, smouldering sun.

All of a sudden, at about three thousand five hundred feet the pilot chute fluttered out above Serov. After such a long delay the jolt must have been very severe. The parachute billowed out and Serov hung immobile from the

extended straps. Had he deliberately made that delayed drop so that the Messerschmitts could not shoot him down in the air or had he simply been too weak to jerk the release ring on his chest? At least one thing was clear to Lunin now: Serov was alive!

The parachute came down with maddening slowness. Lunin circled round it to protect it from attack. He could see two Messerschmitts glittering against the sky overhead. They, of course, could easily see the bright circle of the parachute. But while Lunin was about they would not shoot at Serov. Up came the ground, nearer and nearer. Now it was clear the parachute was going to land in a thin patch of young pines. The tree-tops glowed brilliantly in the low beams of the setting sun which had now almost reached the horizon, but farther down at the foot of the trees it was quite dark. The parachute dropped between two pine-trees without touching a branch. Serov lay on the snow.

Lunin could see plainly how he lay there, his body prone, unnaturally twisted, and quite motionless. The parachute settled down and gathered into a bunch to fall beside him, and that, too, lay still, a sign that there was no wind down there. Lunin went on circling just above the tree-tops, never taking his eyes off Serov. Surely he wasn't going to lie there without even stirring?

At last, after Lunin's twelfth circle, Serov did finally lift himself a few inches from the ground and crawl a little. There was something curious about the way he crawled, crab-like, dragging his right arm and right leg along the snow and drawing after him the straps of the parachute from which he made no effort to free himself. Crawling to the foot of a tree he sat up and leaned his back against the trunk. Then with his left hand he clutched at the snow, brought a handful of it to his face and, it seemed to Lunin, shoved some of it into his mouth. The poor devil must be parched with thirst to be eating snow! He must have burned his face.

In an attempt to attract Serov's attention Lunin swept low over the pine-tree. Surely Serov must have heard him? And then, at last, Serov lifted his left arm over his head and waved feebly.

Lunin circled irresolutely over the tree-tops. Serov was wounded, seriously wounded and suffering from burns. What ought he to do?

The Messerschmitts had gone. The sun had set and twilight was gathering over the forest. If he could have found a place near by where he could have effected any sort of landing Lunin would have landed and run through the forest to Serov, to find out how badly he was wounded and what he could do to help. But it was impossible to land anywhere near, the forest stretched on and on without cuttings or clearings or glades. There was a road. But it was too narrow, it would not take a plane. Serov could only be helped from the station.

Executing a farewell circle Lunin shot over the forest back to the station.

4

The news that Lunin and Serov had shot down two Junkers was known at the regiment command post the moment it happened. The battle took place over Lake Ladoga and every observation post on the lake watched it and reported it in detail by telephone to Tararaksin. But what had happened to Lunin and Serov later, over the forest, remained unknown at the station.

Proskuryakov realized at once that the Germans would not carry out their intended bombardment of Kobona. But he could not be absolutely sure of it, and, as a precaution, ordered every aircraft at the station into the air and went out with them himself. Nobody remained except the mechanics, regiment commissar Yermakov and Dr. Gromeko.

The sun had just gone down and a wintry sunset lingered

over the forest in all its vivid splendour. The sky itself was still quite light but on the airfield dusk was drawing in. The snow crunched crisply underfoot. It was too cold to stand still and everyone kept on the move as they looked up at the sky. According to everybody's calculations Lunin and Serov should already have returned. But the minutes passed and there was no sign of them.

Yermakov knew when the aircraft would have emptied their tanks, and kept glancing at his watch. If they did not show up in the next three minutes they would not show up at all.

Just then Lunin zoomed over the bare hill and landed.

Lunin sprang from the cockpit and from the expression on his face all could see that something was wrong.

"Is he alive?" asked Yermakov.

Lunin nodded.

"Where is he?"

Lunin lifted his knee to bring up the map case he wore slung across his body. The place where Serov had landed was about thirty miles from the station. Dense forest lay all around, without a single village.

"Look, there's a road," said Yermakov. "Is he near it?"

"Quite near," said Lunin. "About half a mile, I should say. There, to the right. I took a good look at the road. Thought of trying to land on it. Too narrow though. Not a hope."

"Could we drive along it? What about the snow?"

Lunin could not say. It was hard to judge from the air. But he had seen no traffic on the road.

"We'll get through," said Yermakov after a moment's pause. "It leads to the front, so it must be in use."

This short, compactly built, self-reliant man gave his instructions in a quiet even voice. Yermakov's voice always gained assurance and steadiness the more excited or annoyed he felt.

This calm manner of his had a soothing effect on Lunin. So he must have some hope, Lunin thought. He himself

fluctuated between hope and despair, despair and hope. If only they got there quickly, if only they didn't waste time.

Everything went very quickly, however. A nurse appeared at the doctor's side, a short girl with a grave little face, wearing a sheepskin with a dark skirt and big felt boots showing under the hem. At her side hung a large medicine chest. Then up bumped the regiment commander's car. Yermakov dismissed the driver, saying he would take the wheel himself. They got in, the doctor in front beside Yermakov, Lunin and the nurse in the back seat.

Meanwhile the lorry that Yermakov had sent for turned up with a party of Red Navy men. Both vehicles left the station within ten minutes of Lunin's return. Proskuryakov was not yet back.

The dusk was deeper now but they could clearly see the hard-packed snow of the road ahead of them. Yermakov drove as fast as he could and soon left the lorry far behind. But their pace seemed like a crawl to Lunin. His sense of alarm grew. Serov would have to lie for no less than two hours in the snow. Even if he was not badly wounded that would be hard enough to bear, but if he were losing blood? . . . Would Serov die, leaving him the only survivor of the squadron?

Dr. Gromeko sat in silence without once turning round. He, too, was evidently deeply concerned and seemed quite another man to Lunin. His bravado and schoolboy bragging had disappeared. He bore himself smartly and his whole manner was collected.

The nurse sat quite still, only reminding Lunin of her presence by sniffing crossly after every violent bump.

Now it was quite dark and the trees each side of the road merged into dense dark walls. The road had become narrow and winding. The car rattled and shook as it bounded at top speed over pot-holes and ruts. Yermakov raced on and on but a full hour and a half had passed by the time they got near the place where Serov had fallen.

Near, but was it? When Yermakov looked over his shoul-

der and asked Lunin whether he should stop and start the search or drive a little farther, Lunin was at a loss what to reply. From the air he could have found the spot in a moment but on the ground everything looked different. He laid his map case on his knees once more and switched on his torch. Yermakov stopped the car. He and Lunin got out, looked around and compared notes. Then they drove on a little farther and stopped again.

Lunin recalled that the road took a sharp bend to the left just at the place where it ran closest to where Serov lay. From the air he would have recognized it unerringly but at night on the ground every bend looked alike. Each time the road turned to the left he and Yermakov got out. At close quarters each bend looked different from the one he was looking for, but as they drove away there always seemed to be a resemblance.

For the fifth time he and Yermakov got out of the car.

"Well, is this the place?" asked the doctor opening the door a little.

Lunin looked irresolutely at the ragged line of the firs. The stars glimmered coldly above the road.

"This is it," Lunin said.

But there was no assurance in his voice.

"Maybe we'll drive on a little," said Yermakov. "Don't be in a hurry, Major, take a good look at the place. We shall lose much more time if we start searching in the wrong place."

"No, this bend is much sharper than the last one," said Lunin.

He was not quite certain, but if they drove on the winding road might take them so far from Serov that they would never find him. The doctor and the nurse got out of the car, too, and stood at the edge of the road. It was decided that Yermakov should wait by the car for the lorry to come up with the Red Navy men but that the other three should start searching immediately.

"Over here, to the right," said Lunin. "The firs soon end and then there are some young pines. . . ."

It was far darker in the forest than on the road, but they could see anything lying on the snow. The snow lay hard and compact in coarse flakes and their boots did not sink in deep. It was deeper where the firs were thicker and the wind had blown the snow into drifts, but these they avoided.

Striding in his heavy fur boots across the snow Lunin kept wondering whether he had chosen the right bend in the road. He remembered that he had left Serov in a rather sparse young pine wood; here, however, the forest was thick and consisted mostly of firs. True, he had noticed from the plane that there were firs growing near the road and this made him feel a little easier for he thought the firs would soon end and the pines begin. But he walked on and on and saw nothing but the shaggy branches of fir-trees around him. He walked faster to get through the belt of firs, only to find more firs beyond. Then he got the impression that he had strayed off course and was walking parallel to the road instead of going away from it; he changed direction, then changed it again, and still he could see nothing but heavy dark fir-trees.

Now he was almost running, floundering heavily in the snow, changing direction every minute. He flung himself where he thought he saw a clearing beyond the firs but instead of a clearing found more firs. He thought he must have gone very far from the road and that he was searching in quite the wrong place, that he had stopped the car at the wrong bend and that through his fault they had lost much time. The minutes ticked on and on. Maybe his mistake would cost Serov his life. Making a few more attempts to get away from the firs he finally gave up in despair. He decided to go back to the road and call the others back and go on to the next bend.

But no sooner had he reached this decision than the fir-trees came to an end, as if by magic. As they thinned he caught sight of the sloping side of a hillock dotted with a

few low pines. It was much lighter here. The snow glistened, the starlit sky looked bright and near at hand, and the many-coloured stars seemed to hang from light transparent pine branches.

"This way," called Lunin. "Follow me."

In the distance a chorus of young voices answered him. The Red Navy men had caught them up and entered the forest with Yermakov. Without waiting for them to reach him, Lunin climbed the slope. Now he could see a fair distance and he frequently noticed dark shapes against the snow resembling from afar the outline of a man sitting or lying. He would run ahead with a tight feeling round his heart, only to find that it was a stump or a low juniper bush.

Darting keen glances from side to side he reached the top of the hillock and went down the other side which was smooth, too. He found that on the top as on the other side there was only a sparse growth of young pines. But as he got lower he distinguished ahead of him something resembling a dark notched wall. Firs again.

Reaching the edge of the pine wood, he turned and climbed back. In order to cover new ground he did not retrace his steps but followed a parallel course about a hundred paces away. Before he reached the top of the hillock, however, he met the Red Navy men who were combing the forest in a broad chain. With them were Yermakov and Gromeko.

"They'll soon find him, Major," Yermakov told Lunin. "There isn't much of this pine wood. They'll find him if he's here."

"He fell plumb into a bit of forest like this," said Lunin.

"There are many bits of forest like this," said Yermakov. "You see how it is: all dips and rises. There are firs in all the dips and pines on all the rises."

Lunin went on searching but he could not get those words of Yermakov's out of his mind. The confidence he had felt when he had reached the first pines vanished. Now,

once more, he felt almost certain that he had mistaken the bend and that they were only wasting time here. Three minutes later he again reached firs; he turned back. The third time he topped the hillock he saw footprints everywhere. The Red Navy men had combed every patch in each direction. There was not one place they hadn't covered. And, while they were messing around, through his fault, Serov, perhaps, was freezing or bleeding to death.... Lunin made up his mind at last. They would have to act, without losing another minute.

He sought out Yermakov and frankly admitted that he had made a mistake. Oh, there was no doubt about it. To his surprise Yermakov hesitated.

Lunin, however, had no more doubts. He asserted that now he remembered everything quite clearly, that it had been a different bend in the road and that the pine-trees had looked quite different. Now he really thought that the trees at the place where Serov had fallen were taller—young ones but not as small as all that. Yermakov was not in a position to contradict him but he still seemed to have his doubts.

And then the doctor found the parachute. He let out a yell and everybody ran to him. The parachute lay in a crumpled heap on the snow. When Lunin, who ran ahead of the others, reached him he found the doctor kneeling on the snow rummaging in the heap of silk hoping to find Serov underneath it.

But though the parachute was certainly there, Serov was not.

"He's gone," said Yermakov.

"He can't have gone!" exclaimed Lunin. "He could hardly stand."

The doctor was down on his stomach examining the snow. In the dark the drops of blood looked black against the snow and were not easily distinguishable at first from the dry twigs and bits of pine bark. But there was much blood. The snow here was hard and smooth and much

trampled. Yes, he must have crawled. Perhaps he had heard the sound of the cars and had tried to get to the road.

The doctor got up and, stooping low, followed the trail of the blood. There was plenty to follow. Serov must have broken through those shrubs. The doctor crawled into the shrubs, drawing the twigs apart. The snow was loose among the shrubs. There was a deep drift. Wading into the snow the doctor plunged into the drift. There was a sound of falling, the crackle of breaking branches.

"Where are you, doc?" Lunin shouted.

The doctor had disappeared.

Lunin crawled into the drift and found himself up to his waist in snow.

"Stop," he heard the doctor shouting from somewhere. "Stop or you'll fall."

"What is it? A bomb-crater?"

"Either that or a ditch, the devil only knows. Go round the other side and come down that way. He's here. I'm lying on top of him."

"He's there? Serov? Alive?"

The doctor did not reply.

There was a sound of snapping twigs as Lunin pushed on through the snow and tried to force his way into the dark ditch he could see ahead. Suddenly he saw a light flash in the bottom of the ditch—the doctor had lit his torch. In the pool of light he saw Serov's head, flung back, his face strangely disfigured with dark stains on the cheeks and forehead. His eyes were open.

"Kolya, Kolya," Lunin cried. "Can't he hear me? Is he alive?"

"Alive so far," said the doctor.

"The light's making his pupils contract," said the nurse who was now standing beside the doctor.

The torch went out. With a quick strong heave the doctor lifted Serov out of the ditch.

"Keep back, don't get in my way," he said to Lunin authoritatively. "I want you all to stand back."

The doctor's orders made everybody fall back dutifully, for they recognized that he was in charge now. The men formed a wide ring around Serov, the doctor and the nurse.

"Stretcher, please," the doctor said quietly.

One of the Red Navy men brought up a stretcher. He placed it on the snow and the doctor began to draw Serov on to it. Serov's head lolled strangely when he was moved, like a doll's head, and Lunin shuddered when he noticed that lifeless movement. Alive so far, he repeated to himself, trying to grasp the meaning of the words. So far....

Kneeling beside the stretcher the doctor was at work. The nurse opened her medicine chest and brought things out of it as the doctor asked for them. He cut the fur boot off Serov's right foot and tossed it aside.

"Tourniquet."

Cutting off the blood-soaked edge of the flying suit he applied a tourniquet to Serov's bare leg a little above the wound. The nurse held the torch while he examined the wound which was just below the knee, to find out how seriously the bone was affected. Then he lifted Serov's right arm. The arm was in a fearful mess—fragments and splinters of bone, shreds of cloth, scraps of cotton-wool, pieces of torn sinew were all stuck together in a mass of clotted blood. The doctor felt the arm with rapid, delicate, light movements. When he straightened it Serov gave a sudden deep groan but did not recover consciousness. The doctor applied a tourniquet close to the shoulder, bandaged the arm and set it in a splint.

Lunin, of course, did not follow the drift of what the doctor was doing. He could, in fact, see practically nothing, but the doctor's assured, calm and resolute manner commanded his confidence. Only a man who knew his job could act with such assurance and calm. The doctor's confidence was all the more surprising because everyone who saw him hanging about the station felt that his excessive coarseness and all his talk about women and wine had its

origin in a lack of self-confidence. Now, as he bent over the wounded pilot, he seemed quite a different man. His very gestures were different, even his voice seemed to have changed. Everybody felt that—not only Lunin but the Red Navy men and Yermakov too—and their attitude to him changed, there were respect and trust in their eyes.

"Lift him up," said the doctor. "Carefully, don't jerk. Now take him to the car."

Covered with somebody's sheepskin, Serov was carried on the stretcher through the forest. The nurse gave her place in the car to Serov and rode back to the station in the lorry. There was no room for the stretcher in the car and Lunin and the doctor supported Serov on their knees all the way back. His head lay on Lunin's chest and Lunin tried his best not to move, not even to breathe.

In spite of the darkness Lunin could see Serov's face quite distinctly. That face was disfigured by burns, it was inflamed and swollen, with dark patches all over it. Now Serov had his eyes closed. From time to time Yermakov at the wheel looked over his shoulder and glanced at Serov's face. The dark burn marks evidently alarmed him.

"He's badly burnt," Yermakov said at length to the doctor.

"That's nothing," said the doctor. "His eyes are all right. That's the main thing. He'll get over the burns. That is, of course, if. . . ."

The doctor did not complete his thought.

If he survives, Lunin said to himself.

"He's lost a lot of blood," said Yermakov.

"A great deal," said the doctor. "The greatest danger for him was the cold. He'd have frozen to death if he hadn't tumbled into that ditch. The snow was soft down there and he was deep under it. It's warmer under the snow. That kept his circulation going."

About five miles farther on Yermakov said: "What about the leg?"

"He had a bullet through it," the doctor replied. "But

it missed the bone, or only snicked it. They'll fix his leg in hospital. He'll walk all right."

This calmed Lunin a little but then the doctor went on:

"But I'm going to amputate his right arm straightaway as soon as we get back."

"Amputate?" said Lunin.

"Yes," said the doctor.

Lunin looked down at Serov's face, so familiar, so pleasant, so manly. A shiver ran down his spine. Serov looked so helpless, so defenceless in his deep swoon. They could do anything they wanted to with him now. A wave of dislike for the doctor swept over Lunin. He recalled how freely the doctor used to talk about "slicing off," and frowned. Amputation is the easiest course, he thought. He ought to heal, not to amputate. That's much harder.

Lunin did not say anything but the doctor seemed to guess his feelings. When at last Serov was carried into the cottage that served the doctor and his orderlies as a sick-bay the doctor was patently annoyed that Lunin followed, too. The cottage was divided in two by a partition that did not reach right up to the ceiling. The part of the room in front of the partition was known as the "waiting-room," the other part was the "ward." Lunin stopped in the waiting-room. He did not dare go any farther. There was no light in the waiting-room but a kerosene lamp burned in the ward and light streamed through the chinks in the partition. From the other side of the partition came the sound of whispered instructions, of a bed being moved and a table being dragged into the middle of the room. For about five minutes Lunin stood in the darkness, not daring to budge or to sit down and hoping that his presence would not be noticed. That, however, was not to be. After scrubbing his hands long and carefully at the tap the doctor came to the waiting-room. He was no longer wearing the flying suit that Lunin was used to see him in. Now he wore a white smock with a towel over his shoulder and cuffs drawn up to his elbows. He looked at Lunin and said:

"You'll have to leave, Major. Go and get some sleep. I'll send for you when he's ready to be moved."

He spoke so firmly and authoritatively that Lunin had no choice but to obey. But his vague dislike of the doctor increased. He felt specially sore about that phrase "Go and get some sleep." The thoughtful beggar, he muttered to himself as he left the cottage. As if he could think of sleep now.

The moment he was outside he heard heavy footsteps and, turning, saw Proskuryakov coming up. Lunin wanted to stop him with a word but Proskuryakov had already gone in. Lunin decided to wait for him to come out.

He had to wait a long time out there in the village street. The lights were out in all the cottages except the one used as the sick-bay. In there, behind the dim glow of the curtains in the small windows, there was an incessant play of shadows as people moved about the ward. Lunin sensed something evil in these shadows and watched them with alarm in his heart. Then at last the moment came when the door burst open and the porch steps creaked under the weight of Proskuryakov's bulk.

"Comrade Commander," Lunin called.

"Ah, it's you, Major," said Proskuryakov. Incidentally, he did not seem at all surprised. He evidently thought it quite natural that Lunin should be standing out there in the dark street outside the sick-bay.

"Did you see him?" Lunin asked.

Proskuryakov nodded.

"He'll live."

"I know," said Lunin. "But they're going to amputate his right arm."

"Yes, it's bad," Proskuryakov said bitterly. "A fine pilot like him."

"Maybe there's a chance they won't do it?"

"The doctor told me you hadn't got much faith in him," said Proskuryakov.

"He said that?"

"I came over here myself to find out whether there was a chance of avoiding amputation. Yermakov told me how things were. But it seems there's no avoiding it, it's got to be done."

Lunin sighed.

"His arm's broken in four places and the bones are all mashed up," Proskuryakov went on. "He really hasn't any arm at all so there's nothing worth saving. He'll have to be taken to Volkhovstroi early in the morning. The hospital train will pick him up and take him east. If they don't amputate now gangrene will develop during the journey and then it would be all up with him."

Lunin said nothing.

"I understand how you feel, Major," Proskuryakov said sadly. "I'd rather have it all at once than be cut in bits. I believe you feel the same. It's a pity he won't be with us when they bring the Guards colours."

They parted.

Lunin walked to his dug-out on the airfield.

It was as warm as usual in the dug-out. The metal stove roared pleasantly. Khromykh, wearing his huge felt boots, rose silently and stood in front of Lunin. He looked specially hard into his face but said nothing. And Lunin was grateful for that.

Khromykh laid Lunin's supper in front of him but Lunin had no desire to eat. He did not intend to sleep either—tired as he felt he was certain he would not be able to drop off. He slipped off his helmet and just as he was, in his flying suit and fur boots, slumped down on to the wooden bunk and sat listening to the homely crackle of the stove. Suddenly he fell off to sleep—quite accidentally, without noticing it.

He started and awoke with a feeling of guilt as if he had overslept and missed something important he should not have missed. He looked at his watch. More than three hours had passed since they had returned to the station.

It was probably all over. Serov had most likely lost his arm.... The dug-out seemed unbearably hot and stuffy. Lunin dragged on his helmet, went outside and walked across the airfield to be sick-bay.

The night was darker and gloomier now. Lunin looked up and noticed that the stars had faded from all but the eastern part of the sky. In the west they were being blotted out by an invisible cloud, one by one. The deepening darkness, the disappearing stars made Lunin feel still more miserable.

As before the light was burning in the sick-bay. Lunin opened the door and went in.

"Who is it? Quiet," he heard the doctor whisper.

The kerosene lamp was burning in the waiting-room now, not in the ward. A nurse—the same girl who had taken part in the search—sat on a bench under the lamp. She was asleep. The doctor, still in his smock, stood before an open cupboard which was used as a pharmacy and was arranging some phials. He turned round when Lunin came in. There was a new expression on his face, Lunin thought; he looked thoroughly exhausted.

"I came just to find out," Lunin murmured.

"He's asleep," said the doctor.

"Asleep?"

"He came to and fell off to sleep. He's very weak."

"Is he in much pain?"

"His burns hurt him a lot."

"And his arm?"

"He only feels the burns so far."

Lunin wanted to find out whether Serov's arm had been amputated or not. But he could not summon up the courage to ask. The doctor guessed his thoughts.

"No. Not yet," he said.

The nurse opened her eyes and said sternly:

"We gave him a blood transfusion and decided to wait till the morning."

"And what will you do in the morning?" asked Lunin.

"Depends on his temperature," said the nurse.

"If it doesn't rise I'll take him to the train," the doctor said.

"And if it rises?"

"If it rises then it may be too late."

The doctor turned away and moved about the room and said in an unsteady voice:

"Risky business."

They said nothing more to each other. Lunin dropped on to the bench next to the silent nurse, while the doctor went on pacing up and down the room. Lunin watched his weary face with grateful sympathy. This doctor was not such a butcher as he had described himself. He was, in fact, a man who felt his responsibility for Serov's life, health and future and who suffered agony because of that responsibility. Lunin felt that the night's experiences had brought him closer to the doctor.

"Go and get some sleep," the doctor said. "Anyway, he won't wake up until the morning."

Lunin assented reluctantly and decided to return at sunrise.

Again he felt sure he would not be able to sleep a wink, and again he dropped off, lulled to sleep by the warmth and silence of the dug-out. He was awakened by a telephone ringing.

It was Tararaksin phoning from the command post to inform him that staff representatives were arriving that day for the presentation of the Guards colours. Lunin put down the receiver and dashed out. He thought he must have overslept and was going to be late, that Serov had already been taken away to Volkhovstroi and that he would never see him again.

It was almost light but the morning was sullen and dull. The clouds hung low, clothing the bare hill in drab velvet. There was a feeling of snow to come. An unfamiliar ambulance stood outside the sick-bay. Lunin saw it from a long way off and hurried still more. Neither the regiment

nor the station had an ambulance car of that sort; the doctor must have sent for it to fetch Serov.

"I was just about to send for you," said the doctor, meeting Lunin on the porch. "He's come to and wants to see you."

"How's his temperature?"

"All right so far."

That meant they hadn't amputated. Holding his breath, Lunin went into the waiting-room. Coming towards him he saw a short woman clad in a sheepskin with a kerchief over her head. It was Hilda. She looked as if she had been crying. She nodded to Lunin and went out.

"Don't make him reply to you," the doctor whispered. "It hurts him to move his lips. The burns. . . ."

Treading as lightly as he could, Lunin went into the ward.

Serov's head was in bandages and only the eyes could be seen. When Lunin entered he saw those eyes, which he knew so well, move and flash a gentle sad smile at him. Lunin felt the corners of his mouth tremble as they used to do when he was a little boy, but he took a grip on himself and smiled back.

The doctor went out so as not to disturb them.

They had never said much to each other and what they did say was commonplace and ordinary. Their intimacy did not need the assistance of words, they understood each other perfectly well without them. Lunin only needed to glance in Serov's eyes to know what he was thinking and those faint quivers at the corners of Lunin's mouth told Serov everything.

This was the moment of leave-taking. To break the silence Lunin asked Serov to write and let him know his address. He himself promised to write about everything that went on in the regiment the moment he received the address of the hospital where Serov had been sent. Serov answered with a flicker of the eyes: he understood and fully agreed.

"I'll look after your suitcase," said Lunin. "I'll see it's sent to you later."

A tinge of sadness flashed across Serov's eyes. Lunin understood at once.

"Or rather, I'll not send it," he added hastily. "I'll keep it for you till you come back to us."

He broke off. He could hear the doctor outside, giving orders and making some arrangements in the ambulance. The driver was filling the radiator and getting ready to leave.

Lunin said nothing and looked at Serov with a feeling that he was seeing him for the last time. There was the sound of heavy tramping on the porch and out of the corner of an eye Lunin caught sight of Proskuryakov and Yermakov who had come to say good-bye to Serov.

So that was the end. They would never be alone together again.

Suddenly the bandage over Serov's lips moved faintly. Serov was making an effort to say something.

Lunin leaned over him and heard:

"If there's a letter. . . ."

Lunin knew at once what letter Serov meant. If, at long last, a letter came from her. . . .

"I'll forward it," said Lunin with a nod. "I'll forward it. I'll write to her, too."

Proskuryakov and Yermakov came in. Lunin did not want to remain with Serov in their presence and slipped quietly out on to the porch. There were many people round the ambulance now; they had come to see Serov off. All eyes were turned on Lunin but no one spoke to him; it was clear to them all how he felt.

Lunin heard the doctor say to Proskuryakov:

"I haven't amputated but that doesn't mean anything. They may do so at the hospital."

The two men left, passing close to Lunin. The doctor opened the door of the ambulance, looked inside and showed something to Proskuryakov. Serov was carried out on a stretcher—a long, stiff, motionless, muffled-up figure. Lunin would like to have looked into his eyes once more

but those eyes were shut. The stretcher-bearers slid the laden stretcher into the ambulance, the doctor took a seat beside it, the doors were slammed and the car bumped along the street between the two rows of cottages.

"Major Lunin," said Proskuryakov. "Let us go and see how your mechanics are getting on. The party that is bringing the colours may be interested, too."

"Very good," replied Lunin.

Now he was the only one of Rassokhin's squadron left. It was up to him to carry on the good work to the end.

5

The day turned out dark and gloomy as if the sun had not yet risen; and it was just as dark at dinner-time and then grew even darker.

Khovrin sat alone in the cottage writing. A car drove up and stopped beside the forked birch-tree. Uvarov came in.

Khovrin understood everything at once.

"So early?" he said as he rose.

Uvarov looked paler and more restrained than usual.

"Put your coat on," he said. "Come with me. You've got to see this."

He seated Khovrin beside him in the car and they drove off.

"Do you know who has brought the new colours to the regiment?" Uvarov said.

"The air commander?"

"No."

"Who then?"

"Zhdanov."

There was another car in front, a big black one.

The white airfield, its border of trees only just visible in the gloom, looked vast and empty. Lost in that huge white space a short line of men could be seen at the edge.

This was the air regiment.

While the cars were running along the edge of the airfield Khovrin looked attentively out of the window. There it was, the whole regiment. In those three groups stood the personnel of all three squadrons, pilots in front, mechanics behind. All that was left, a handful of men. In front of the mechanics of Two Squadron stood only one pilot—Lunin.

The commanding officers—Proskuryakov, Yermakov and Shakhbazyan—stood in a separate group. Proskuryakov looked enormous beside his commissar and his chief of staff.

Both cars drove up to the place and stopped.

Zhdanov stepped out of the front car. The regiment recognized him. One of the leaders of the Party here, at their station! No one had expected that.

After Zhdanov the air commander got out, a man of middle height, rather stout. Then came the admiral—a lean, well-knit figure in a black greatcoat with gold braid. He was carrying the new colours.

He gave the colours to Zhdanov. The wind stirred the heavy cloth.

Proskuryakov took several paces forward and reported.

There was a dusting of bright frost on Zhdanov's moustache and brows. He looked intently at the faces of the men ranged before him. The firm set of his lips showed how deeply stirred he was at the sight of this depleted regiment. When he spoke, his voice, quiet but reaching to all, sounded unaffected and unexpectedly gentle.

"The Communist Party and the Soviet Government," he said, "have entrusted me with the duty of bestowing on you these colours, knowing that you will be worthy of them."

He held out the staff of the banner to Proskuryakov. Proskuryakov took the banner and dropped on one knee.

The whole regiment fell on one knee before the colours.

"Our country, hear our voice," said Proskuryakov.

The men repeated:

"Our country, hear our voice."

"Today we take a sacred oath of allegiance to you," Proskuryakov went on. "Today we swear to fight the

enemy still more mercilessly and fiercely, and to glorify with our tireless strength the formidable power of our Soviet arms."

As Khovrin heard these words they sounded quite unfamiliar to him though he had written them himself with Lunin's help. They sounded so solemn, so grave, as slowly and quietly they fell from Proskuryakov's lips and were repeated by the regiment kneeling before their colours.

"Our country! As long as our hands hold the control column, as long as our eyes see the earth groaning under the fascist jack boot, as long as our hearts beat in our breasts and the blood flows in our veins, we shall fight, knowing no fear, showing no mercy, contemptuous of death in the name of complete and final victory. . . ."

And so the regiment took its oath before its new colours, won by the victories of the living and of those who were no longer among the living.

"Guardsmen do not know what defeat is," Proskuryakov went on.

That is true, thought Khovrin. They are few but they have never been beaten.

"Guardsmen may die but they must win," said Proskuryakov.

That is true, thought Khovrin, as if hearing the words for the first time.

Tears sprang to his eyes. But perhaps it was the keen wind blowing straight into his face.

"Atten . . . shun," cried Shakhbazyan.

The regiment sprang to its feet. Proskuryakov, carrying the colours, walked down the whole line and the colours streamed over the heads of all. Then he handed them to the standard-bearer. The regiment, outlined against the white snow, marched under its new colours past Zhdanov, past the air commander.

It soon grew dark.

Yes, guardsmen may die but they must win, thought Khovrin, frowning into the wind. That is true. . . .

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Hurricanes

1

Rumours that the regiment would soon be getting new aircraft began to circulate at the station as early as the spring.

People kept saying that Soviet aircraft factories were beginning to put out new fighters which from all indications were a considerable improvement on the present

types. Some had even seen them, though only from a distance and in the air. What most attracted the pilots about these new planes was their speed. They were said to be faster than the Messerschmitt-109 and the fighter-pilots dreamed of the day when they could pay off an old score with the Messerschmitts in these new aircraft.

However, the weeks passed without the regiment getting new aircraft. From time to time it would be tossed a plane or two—but they were always I-16s with as many holes and patches and trips back for refit as the planes with which the regiment had started the war. True, this meant that some units were being re-equipped with new aircraft since their old planes were being sent to reinforce other units; and from that people argued that the re-equipping of the air force was under way.

"And once it has got under way it will reach us, you see," reasoned Commissar Yermakov. "It's only a question of waiting."

"Waiting, you say," said Proskuryakov glumly.

Yermakov's imperturbable optimism got on Proskuryakov's nerves. He could not reconcile himself to the fact that his Guards regiment was being overlooked.

"Yes, waiting," said Yermakov.

"And in the meantime our regiment gets all the rubbish that can be swept up from every front," Proskuryakov muttered. "Aren't we as good as the others?"

"We're just as good, but the others, it seems, are needed more just now," said Yermakov in that reasonable manner of his.

"That's impossible," said Proskuryakov, his broad face reddening. "Needed more than we are?" he boomed indignantly. "And here the Germans are having it their own way over the lake; since the thaw they've taken to bombing the unloading bases every day."

He was right. Since the ice had broken up on Lake Ladoga, cargoes for Leningrad had been shipped in barges, and this greatly enhanced the importance of fighter protec-

tion, the barges being much more vulnerable from the air than lorries had been. Nevertheless Lunin in his heart of hearts sided with Yermakov. With the arrival of warm weather the Germans had started a new offensive in the south and he felt that what was going on there, far away, was on a much bigger scale and was more important than anything around Leningrad just then.

During the spring the regiment received several new pilots, too. But like the aircraft they could in fact hardly be called new; they were men who had been wounded early in the war on various fronts, lain in hospital for a while and had now come back to the front. One of these pilots came to Lunin's squadron. He, however, had never been wounded and, indeed, could only be called a pilot in a formal sense.

Division Commissar Uvarov flew him to the station. He came in his U-2 and behind him sat a tall sergeant with prominent cheek-bones and a rather sullen expression. He was named Anton Kuznetsov and before Uvarov came across him had served in one of the air station ground battalions grubbing up tree stumps and sweeping snow.

"Ah, I know that fellow," Uvarov said when he saw him. He had an excellent memory for faces.

He had run across Kuznetsov before the war at a flying school and recalled an incident when Kuznetsov had been expelled for drunkenness.

Kuznetsov recognized Uvarov, too, and this made him even more sullen.

"How did you happen to get here?" Uvarov asked.

"Do you mean to the war, Comrade Division Commissar?" asked Kuznetsov, holding himself at attention. "I was called up."

This deliberately silly answer was a challenge. Uvarov, however, pretended not to notice it.

"I mean how did you come to be serving in the station battalion?"

"Oh, in this battalion? I asked to be sent here," ex-

plained Kuznetsov, no longer pert but just as sullen. "They wanted to send me to some transport company because I understand engines but I asked to be sent to an air station. It's a bit nearer aircraft anyway."

"D'you like them?"

"I do."

Kuznetsov fell silent. The subject was obviously a painful one.

"Think you could learn to fly again?" asked Uvarov.

"I don't know. I've never tried since."

"Would you like to have a go at it?"

Kuznetsov looked distrustfully at Uvarov. Was he joking?

But Uvarov was not joking.

"Well, you didn't finish your training course, but I remember the way you flew," he said. "And I remember the way you shaped at target-practice. You'd make a fighter-pilot. What do you think about it?"

"I don't know."

He was still not certain whether Uvarov was serious.

"And I *do* know," said Uvarov. "If I tell you you'll make a fighter-pilot you needn't have any doubts about it. If you're willing, of course."

"I am willing, Comrade Division Commissar," Kuznetsov said firmly.

The regiment accepted Kuznetsov distrustfully. The pilots did not believe he could make a flyer. Yermakov disliked him most of all. Himself a teetotaller, Yermakov thoroughly despised men who drank too much and tended to be tough with them. He frowned when he heard that Uvarov wanted to attach Kuznetsov to Two Squadron.

"To Two Squadron, Comrade Division Commissar?!"

"What's wrong with that?" asked Uvarov. "Lunin needs a second."

"And if he starts drinking?"

"He doesn't drink any more."

"Not at all?"

"Not at all."

"Excuse my asking, Comrade Division Commissar, but how do you know?"

"He told me so himself."

"Ah, I see . . ." drawled Yermakov who, though he did not dare argue with the division commissar, made no attempt to disguise his scepticism. "But if he does drink, after all?"

"Then you can send him to a punishment company," said Uvarov, and added with a smile: "Me, too."

Kuznetsov was given one of the newly received I-16s and under Lunin's supervision made several training flights. At first he flew uncertainly, his lack of practice and training being obvious, but Lunin's experience as an instructor through whose hands hundreds of pilots had passed at once told him that Kuznetsov was resourceful, quick on the uptake, persevering and brave.

Ten days later Proskuryakov asked Lunin: "Will he be of any use?"

"He will," said Lunin.

"Take care he doesn't let you down," said Yermakov. "He's got to defend your tail, you know."

"He won't let me down," replied Lunin.

Next day Lunin took Kuznetsov with him on a fighting mission.

In their first skirmishes with Messerschmitts over the lake Kuznetsov showed himself to be a well-disciplined, bold and intelligent fighter-pilot. He could really be counted on. He did not dash forward nor did he lag behind, he did not abandon Lunin in danger and directed all his attention to protecting Lunin's tail.

Regiment and squadron alike quickly grew used to Kuznetsov, though for rather a long time there was a certain coolness in their attitude. In the mess Hilda served him indifferently, without looking at him, and it was clear she did not consider him one of the company. Kuznetsov himself was primarily to blame for this, for his manner was on

the dry side with everybody. His looks seemed to say: "I know you think badly of me, but what the heck do I care? I'm doing my job and I'm not the least bit interested in what you are thinking."

Lunin's relations with him were probably better than anybody else's. He felt drawn to the man, and unerringly knew that Kuznetsov secretly respected him and felt a debt of gratitude to him. But there was a certain coolness even in their relations. The main reason for this was probably the fact that Lunin, without knowing it himself, could not in the bottom of his heart forgive Kuznetsov for taking Serov's place. Lunin was too fond of Serov to allow himself the same relations with his new second as he had had with Serov.

All those things happened in May. In June, Proskuryakov was sent for by Air Headquarters and came back joyfully preoccupied. He brought with him wonderful orders: one of the squadrons with all its air crew and ground staff had to go to an air station far behind the front to take over new pilots and aircraft.

"At last we shall see those new aircraft," said Yermakov. "One of our squadrons at least will be at full strength."

It was left to the regiment commander to decide which of the three squadrons was to be sent for re-forming. The choice fell on Two Squadron. There was much in favour of this decision: respect for the memory of Rassokhin, the fact that, of the three squadron leaders, Lunin was the most experienced airman and finally, the fact that few as were the pilots and aircraft left in One and Three Squadrons, still fewer remained in Two. So Lunin was told to prepare his squadron for the journey.

At last the time came for him to part with the aircraft which he had taken over from Nikritin almost a year ago. He turned it over to One Squadron where one of the pilots had lost his plane. Kuznetsov turned his aircraft over to Three Squadron.

The trip to the rear had to be made by train from

Volkhovstroi. Before departure a message from division headquarters was received at the regiment command post to say that eight young pilots intended for Two Squadron had already arrived at the training station and were waiting there. As the troop train would be several days on the journey, Yermakov decided to fly there in his U-2 and make arrangements for the men to be quartered, to enroll them and put them straight to work so that they should not be left unsupervised and—most important of all—so that he could look them over. The regiment engineer flew with him, for everyone was certain that since the pilots had arrived the planes could not be far behind.

Lunin went to Volkhovstroi Station with Kuznetsov, accompanied by all the mechanics and fitters, Slava and Hilda, who this time did not have to be kidnapped—everyone had grown so used to considering her as part and parcel of Two Squadron that no attempt was made to prevent her from leaving. Lunin had not been at Volkhovstroi since August the previous year and was shocked to see how much it had changed. The town's log-built cottages, the railings and outhouses, the telegraph poles had been felled by blast and the trees raised dead, charred branches to the sky. Lorries swung incessantly from one side of the road to the other to avoid gaping craters, some old, full of water with frog spawn floating on it, others newly torn out of the red clay and quite dry. The station and all its surrounding buildings had been reduced to piles of rubble.

German aircraft had been bombing Volkhovstroi for almost a year, in an attempt to destroy the dam of the Volkhov hydro-power station and particularly the railway bridge over the River Volkhov, used by the trains on their way to the disembarkation ports on Lake Ladoga with supplies for Leningrad. The Germans bombed Volkhovstroi almost every day, patterning nearly every inch of ground around, but still the dam and the bridge remained intact. It was almost a miracle but it was so. It seemed, indeed,

that those huge and splendid constructions were invulnerable and mocked the enemy's powerless rage.

On the broad, sprawling tangle of railway lines at Volkhovstroi Station Lunin experienced his first air-raid, and for the first time saw an air battle from the ground. Time and time again he had seen the bombs slip from the Junkers but he had never before happened to find himself under these bombs. He felt quite at a loss when he saw the black planes with their ugly humming sound come through the thin sun-pierced cloud over Volkhovstroi and launch those bombs which dropped with such repulsive slowness. The feeling of being utterly defenceless, of being disarmed, was so new to him. He could do nothing about it, nothing but stand and stare. When the bombs began to burst—on the green-clad slopes of the embankment near the railway bridge, some two hundred paces from where they stood—he chased after Slava like a broody hen after a chicken, grasped him by the arm and hung on to him as if this ensured the lad's safety.

Later it quite embarrassed him to recall the calm way the railway workers round about took the air-raid. As the bombs crashed and the ack-ack guns crackled, he saw a little shunting engine go on marshalling trucks as before, he heard it whistle shrilly near the points, saw a guard waving a little flag to the driver while the oilers took a last look at the axles and tested the couplings. No sooner had the last bomb burst and the last Junkers made off into the clouds, than a trolley clattered up to the bridge with a repair gang to replace the rails twisted by blast. Medical orderlies in white smocks and army boots clumped off that way, too, carrying stretchers, which meant there must have been casualties.

The Junkers flashed in the clouds again, evidently reforming for a second attack, but at that moment a pair of Soviet fighters darted across their path. Spotting them the Junkers at once changed course and flew back into the

clouds, while two Messerschmitts headed for the Soviet fighters to cover their withdrawal.

The battle began, fast and furious. Every two or three seconds the position of the four aircraft changed. Lunin heard the short bursts of fire—it sounded like frogs croaking at that distance—and the whine of the engines as the planes made incredibly tight turns. How many times had he taken part in dog-fights like that with Messerschmitts! When he was flying he was quite calm as he moved quickly into position, always aware of what had to be done. But as he followed the battle from the ground he felt horribly nervous for no other reason than that he was out of it. He realized for the first time in his life what a frightful thing an air battle was. Messerschmitts attacking Soviet planes and he unable to do anything about it! If only he were up there! And when all four aircraft, still fighting, disappeared out of sight beyond the tree-tops he felt so overcome that he slumped down on the grass.

"Whew! That took a long time," he said, removing his cap and mopping his brow.

"Less than three minutes," said Kuznetsov. "I timed the whole thing."

It was about two hundred miles to the training base but they took three days to cover the distance. The weather had grown warm and the sun beat down on the roofs of the goods vans in which they were travelling. Through the open door Lunin watched the northern forest he had known since childhood. The wild strawberry was in blossom, scattering the whole earth with little white flowers. Heat rose from the hillocks with their cover of stiff bilberry bushes and heather, warmed by the sun during the long hours of daylight. But a clammy cold came from the marshes where sheets of black peaty water lay under the aspens.

Yermakov came in a lorry to meet them at the station and take them to the training base. The mechanics and

fitters scrambled into the back and Lunin squeezed in beside Yermakov in the driver's cab.

"Well, what's the gen?" asked Lunin.

"The aircraft haven't come yet," Yermakov replied.

"Any rumours?"

"Not a thing."

"And what about them?"

Yermakov turned his head and glanced at Lunin. He knew whom he was referring to.

"A pack of kids," said Yermakov.

2

The most striking feature about the new pilots was their extreme youth.

Lunin had grown accustomed to having people around him who were considerably younger than himself. He was older than anybody in the regiment, than anybody in the division, too. That was partly due to the youth of the service in general—an airman who had turned forty was like some fragment of the last century, something reminiscent of prehistoric times. Lunin was used to being surrounded by youngsters but none the less he felt a momentary shock when he first saw the newcomers. Lanky schoolboys. Yes, kids, just kids.

Yermakov, followed by Lunin and Kuznetsov, walked over to the village school where the new pilots were billeted. Long before they reached its doors they heard the sound of heavy thumps coming through the open windows. They walked on and looked through the windows and saw figures flying through the air in strange attitudes. A game of leap-frog was in progress.

The moment they stepped on to the porch the game stopped. Taken unawares, the players' first reaction was one of alarm. Someone cried in a voice shaky with panic: "Shun," and a big clumsy fellow, his boots clattering on the

wooden floor, sprang out to meet them. Stumbling over the threshold he regained his balance with difficulty, drew himself up in front of Yermakov and said in hurried, desperate confusion:

"Comrade Regiment Commissar.... Guards Sergeant Ostrosablin duty-N.C.O. for the hostel reporting.... Nothing to report on my spell."

Sweat poured from his broad flushed face and it was obvious that he, too, had been playing leap-frog.

Ostrosablin.... There was something familiar in his accent and bearing, even in his strong, slightly bowed legs. He was a Cossack, Lunin realized at once, for he had lived for many years in the Cossack lands and had seen a fair number of Cossacks in his days. Oh yes, the man was a real Cossack. He would be fine on a horse, but what would he be like in a plane?

They went into a class-room where beds had been set up.

"At ease," said Yermakov.

And so Lunin saw his new comrades for the first time.

He did not at once take in all those faces, flushed from exercise and still looking somewhat alarmed by the unexpected appearance of their officers.

One face, however, which he noticed at once, struck him by its vividness. Was the man a Gipsy, Lunin wondered, when he saw the raven hair, the dark brows, the deeply sunburned cheeks, the full red lips contrasting with the strong white teeth. The eyes, too, might be those of a Gipsy, black with bluish whites; they were attentive, calm, cheerful eyes. They expressed self-confidence, a bit too much of it, perhaps.

On the other hand there stood beside him a snub-nosed youngster with a round face that was heavily freckled and wore an expression of childish timidity and shyness. Now there was one who had never put a razor to his cheek, thought Lunin.

Yermakov introduced Lunin to the men and all eyes turned in his direction. So there he was at last, their squad-

ron leader, whom they had been expecting for so long and of whom they had heard a good deal. They looked at him with respect. Lunin, incidentally, noted some surprise in several of those looks—probably they had pictured him as somebody quite different.

Yermakov left them so that they could get to know each other better. Lunin found a chair for himself and suggested they should all sit down. The youngsters arranged themselves on the beds under which, behind their dangling legs, stood dusty suitcases and boxes. They all ranked as sergeants; they had been trained fast, in six months, and passed out as sergeants, not as junior lieutenants as they would have done before the war.

Lunin, who found the general shyness catching, turned to the freckled round-faced lad whom he took to be the youngest.

"What is your name?"

"Ryabushkin," said the other, jumping to his feet.

Why, he was a mere kid, thought Lunin.

"How old are you?"

Lunin would not have been surprised if the fellow had said he was seventeen. However, he had misjudged.

"Twenty," gasped Ryabushkin.

He had grown pale with emotion and this made his freckles all the more prominent. That question was probably a painful one for him. He had evidently suffered a good deal from the fact that everybody took him to be younger than he actually was.

As it turned out, there were pilots in the squadron younger than Ryabushkin. For instance, the one who looked like a Gipsy was only nineteen. And he was not a Gipsy at all, he was a native of a small mining town in the Donets Basin. His name was Ilya Tatarenko. He explained to Lunin that before the war he had worked in the pits as a coal-hewer though he had always dreamed of being a pilot. As soon as the war began he applied to be admitted to a

flying school and was accepted. His father and two elder brothers worked in the pits.

"Nobody in our family is content to walk the earth," he said with a flash of his white teeth, "it's either underground or in the air for us."

The longer Lunin looked at him the more he liked what he saw. The lad was tall, strong and good-looking. Now, there was a really well-built lad. Probably a bit difficult to handle, though. A firm character, thought Lunin. Yes, rather too much self-assurance.

From Tatarenko, Lunin's eyes moved to a slender fair-haired youth with small side-burns. Lunin noticed he was wearing a wedding ring. Obviously the fellow was not indifferent to his appearance. His name was Vadim Lazarovich. He glanced around him with a languid casual air. At first this languor and the side-burns did not appeal to Lunin but then the man smiled. His face was transformed, and he became an open-hearted, candid and very pleasant fellow.

Lazarovich, it turned out, came from a small southern town where it was considered the thing to parade the main street wearing side-burns and looking languid. It also turned out that of all the young men in the room Lazarovich was the only one who was married. He willingly showed Lunin a photograph of his wife, taking it out of a smart little wallet with a zip-fastener. The picture showed a plump girl with frizzy dark hair.

"She used to work in a sweets shop before the war," he said weightily, evidently considering that to be a most *recherché* occupation.

Little by little Lunin drew the pilots into conversation.

"Comrade Guards Major," Tatarenko asked, "can you tell us whether we are to get aircraft soon?"

Every face lit up, all eyes were turned on Lunin. Obviously this was the burning question of the day for all of them. They were fed up with waiting patiently. The war

was in its second year, yet they had not been in action. They were longing to get aircraft, to fly and to fight.

"Soon," said Lunin, though he knew no more than they did.

He did not pretend to know more than they did. These young men began to speculate about the aircraft they were to receive and Lunin joined in. He found they had more to say about the new Soviet fighters than he had. Several aircraft of the latest types—one designed by Yakovlev, another by Lavochkin—had recently appeared at the training station the pilots had just left.

Tatarenko and a tall thick-lipped young man called Kostin had even flown two or three times in these new aircraft.

With shining eyes they vied with each other in describing them. The new aircraft were sturdy, easily handled and highly manœuvrable. They were powerfully armed but the main thing about them was their speed. The pilots poured out technical terms to prove they were real airmen. And Lunin read on their enthusiastic faces that they had joined up with the same passion for flying as he had himself.

The next day he began instructing them. As there was nothing to fly he had to confine himself to theory. They did not know much in this line but turned out to be better trained than he had expected.

Kostin, for example, even surprised him by the amount he knew. He had an excellent knowledge of maths and physics; a rather ungainly man, he would stand in front of Lunin and, replying to his questions in a rich bass voice, describe how air vortices swirled from the surface of an aircraft in flight. He would reel off one complicated formula after another; calculating aloud, he would keep his eyes fixed firmly on the floor or the wall as if the figures were written there for him to read. He was interested in everything that had to do with aviation and it was clear he had studied the subject seriously and deeply. When he

was replying to Lunin the other men followed him attentively and Lunin soon adopted the practice of asking him questions which would add to everybody's knowledge.

While waiting for the aircraft to arrive Lunin did all he could to cram the pilots with class-room work; he realized that nothing could be more harmful and arduous for them than idleness. He took flying theory with them himself; one of the mechanics went over an engine with them and one of the armourers gave them a gunnery course. They got their political instruction sometimes from Yermakov, sometimes from Deyev, the mechanic, who was the squadron's Party organizer. Each day before supper they marched to the range outside the village for machine-gun and hand-grenade practice.

3

Those were anxious times. Every two or three days brought another piece of bad news. On July 3 the evacuation of Sevastopol was announced. On July 8 the Red Army abandoned Stary Oskol, four days later Kantemirovka and Lisichansk. On July 15 Boguchar and Millerovo fell and on July 19 Voroshilovgrad, the last big Ukrainian town in Soviet hands. There was a lull on the Northern and Central fronts. But down in the south, a thousand miles from the little north Russian village where the pilots waited, the Germans went on advancing and no one knew when and where they were going to be stopped.

The pilots with whom Lunin had started the war—Rassokhin, Serov, Kabankov and Chepelkin—were, like him, all natives of north Russia. But all the new pilots in the squadron happened to come from the south. The training school from which they had passed out had drawn its recruits from the southern regions and the men came from the Donets Basin, the Kuban and the Rostov regions; Ryabushkin was the only exception—he was from somewhere

near Saratov. All the places that were being mentioned on the wireless every day were well known to the men.

They were deeply anxious about the fate of their families. When they had joined up, their homes had been far from the front, but now those homes had become the front itself and the enemy was there. And it had to happen that just in those days they were stuck in some out-of-the-way village waiting for their aircraft, instead of being in the air, fighting. The first question Lunin heard when each morning he joined the men in their hostel was whether he had anything new to tell them about the aircraft.

But there was no news of the aircraft.

Only Slava felt happy during these anxious days; his happiness appeared to be complete. A spell of fine warm summery weather had set in, the sky was blue and the grass fully grown. Before leaving for the new air station Slava had been removed from the strength of the clothing stores and placed at the disposal of the commanding officer of Two Squadron. The air-raid at Volkhovstroi had left him unmoved and the long trip by train and then by lorry had been one long series of delights. At the new base he enjoyed the fullest freedom. Here there was not even a Sergeant Zina to nag at him. He was billeted in the same cottage as Lunin but all day long did just what he wanted. He lost no time in making pals among the village boys, despite the fact that he tended to look down on them as befitted a front-line soldier and the possessor of a real sailor's cap and a pair of bell-bottoms too. He basked in the respect of these lads, addressed them in a special grown-up voice and ordered them about gruffly as he wandered with them through the forest, or floated on a raft down the deep calm river that flowed past the village, or bathed for hours until his skin had turned blue and he was all goose-flesh.

To a twelve-year-old boy a year seems longer than do ten years to a grown-up. Pre-war days, when he lived in town with his father and mother, with Grandad and Sonya,

now seemed ages ago. A whole lifetime had passed since then. The winter of famine in Leningrad, the field where German shells had helped him to dig potatoes in the frozen earth, Grandad's death—all this lay deep in the past. He had forgotten nothing but, like all children, he was always too engrossed in the present to indulge in reminiscences.

He felt that he had known the regiment, the squadron and Lunin for ages and ages. He knew the life of the regiment, if not better, then in much more detail than Proskuryakov. He knew everybody in the regiment, knew their characters, knew who got letters and who did not, knew their jokes and their favourite expressions. And everyone knew him. He was part of the regiment and felt himself well and firmly established in life, for he was sure that at any moment everyone, individually or together with the whole regiment, was ready to protect him.

The new pilots got interested in him at once. At first they thought he was Lunin's son. Then it was explained that he was the regiment's adopted child, a Leningrad lad saved from starvation. They liked him and offered him their protection.

From the time they arrived the new pilots evinced the liveliest interest in the history of their regiment, and of their own squadron in particular. They were proud to have been sent straight from training school to a famous Guards unit. During the winter the Moscow newspapers had printed accounts of the feats of Rassokhin, Lunin, Kabankov and Chepelkin, and they, who never missed a line about the air force, remembered these names well. They were proud that their commanding officer was to be Lunin—"that famous Lunin." Yet Lunin's outward appearance did not altogether correspond to their conception of what a hero of his stature should look like. Their interest in the squadron rose to fresh heights when Yermakov let them see a complete file of Kabankov's *Battle Sheet.*

After Kabankov's death, Yermakov had made a complete file of these sheets and kept them carefully. He attached

great importance to them, yet he had hardly expected that these sheets of paper scribbled over in coloured crayons would have so tremendous an effect on the new pilots. The men spread them out on their beds, pored over them, kept returning to them, discussing them endlessly. They could not be torn away from them. Crude though Kabankov's draftsmanship was, he had a knack for hitting off likenesses and conveyed every action with remarkable faithfulness. These bulletins helped them visualize Serov, Rassokhin, Chepelkin, Baiseitov, Nikritin and those pilots who had fought, but not survived, the battles in Estonia still earlier in the war. The young pilots saw before their eyes the armadas of Junkers which came in to bomb besieged Leningrad, the countless air battles, and they learned by heart the sad and terrible lines of the poem "Vengeance."

The more they learned, the keener was their curiosity for more. Deyev had been Kabankov's mechanic; he kept in his chest a complete set of the division newspaper *Wings of the Baltic*, in which there were articles by or about Kabankov. Now all these papers were dug out and read and reread as they passed from hand to hand.

Deyev was found to possess photographs of the pilots who had served in Two Squadron since the outbreak of the war. All these photographs were taken charge of by Misha Karyakin, a small curly-haired pilot with gay, slanting eyes; he stuck them on a big sheet of cardboard under the emblem of the Guards colours which he cut out of red paper. Under each photograph Kolya Khametov, another young pilot, wrote in copperplate lettering the rank and full name of the pilot and the number of aircraft he had shot down. This sheet was hung up in the cabin where it was the centre of attention of the new pilots, who never tired of studying it.

They wanted to be like those other pilots—not in general but individually, according to their choice. Misha Karyakin, for instance, found certain resemblances between himself and Kabankov. True, the only thing they

had in common appeared to be their height—Karyakin, as Kabankov had been in his time, was shorter than anyone else in the squadron. Karyakin could not draw, write verse or play the accordion like Kabankov. But he was a past master at making jokes and poking fun, attributes which, he imagined, Kabankov had possessed, too, judging from the humour of his caricatures. Besides, Misha had a voice and a great repertoire of songs, in that department he was superior to Kabankov.

The rest, too, paid Kabankov his due, yet it was not him they made their ideal. Rassokhin—he was the one who captured Ilya Tatarenko's imagination. There was a commander for you! A real ace!

Incidentally, Tatarenko was not the only one who dreamed of becoming a second Rassokhin. Kostin did, too. When he came across an article in a back number of the newspaper describing how Rassokhin's squadron had scattered eighty enemy aircraft on their way to bomb the fleet, Kostin said:

"Tactics is a science. Aerial combat has to be built on scientific foundations."

This made Kuznetsov grin. Kostin turned on him.

"I know why you're grinning, Kuznetsov," he said, not in the least offended. "What you're thinking is—there am I talking about battle tactics and it's not sure yet how I'll behave under fire. That's it, isn't it? That's what you're thinking?"

Kuznetsov did not reply.

"Well, you've the right to think that way," Kostin continued thoughtfully. "I've never been under fire. But my idea is right, quite independent of how I personally will behave. Aerial combat has to be built on scientific foundations."

"You mean to say you think Rassokhin did that?" asked Tatarenko.

"I'm sure he did."

"Oh no," said Tatarenko. "I think he founded his style of fighting on something quite different."

"On what?"

"I don't know exactly how to put it," said Tatarenko reflectively. "I think the best word for it is inspiration."

The colour mounted to Tatarenko's cheeks when he used this word. He stole a glance at Kuznetsov to see whether he was smiling. But this time Kuznetsov made no comments. He was just as taciturn and reserved with the newcomers as he was with the rest of the regiment. The pilots put this down to the fact that being a man who had been in action he felt supercilious about such unscarred novices as they.

In the air-crew mess Hilda, naturally, was the great object of attraction. That was not at all surprising—seen through the vapour rising from the dishes, her little doll-like face with its milk-and-roses complexion was as pretty as ever. But to them she was "that Hilda," the Hilda Kabankov had often drawn in his *Battle Sheet*. She could be seen, for instance, in that comic drawing of Chepelkin fighting a rat. She had known them all, those all-but-legendary pilots of the squadron, she had seen them with her own eyes, she had fed them three times a day. And the new pilots saw her not simply as a young and very nice girl but almost as a sacred relic.

Even Slava was something of a relic, too. After all he was one of the squadron's veterans, though not such a veteran as Hilda. He realized that very well himself and was aware of his superiority over the novices. In fact it was not they who were his protectors but he who was theirs. As a veteran he gave them no little advice on practical matters connected with drawing their uniforms, mild tobacco and extra rations. Besides he was a close friend of the squadron leader and even of the division commissar, and the new pilots listened to him meekly when he told them what Lunin would like and what he wouldn't. Sometimes Slava would start talking to them like their commanding officer.

However, most of the time his relations with them were natural and friendly.

Tatarenko would often call to him: "Hey, Slava, come for a ride!"

With a laugh he would grasp hold of Slava as the little boy ran up to him, and swing him high over his black curly head. He would make Slava stand on his shoulders or on his head, he would set him spinning or turning somersaults and toss him turning and twisting high in the air. Then he would bring him swooping down from aloft, catching him just above the ground, and start swinging him between his long widespread legs. Sometimes others would take part in the fun, generally Karyakin and Ostrosablin. And then all restraint would be abandoned; the men would hurl Slava to each other like a ball, they would tear him from each other's hands, take flying leaps over each other with Slava in their arms. There were times when Slava protested and tried to break away but that was beyond his strength, which he had reduced to nothing by laughing. Only when all the participants were completely exhausted did the fun stop.

They would sit down for a breather and then start bombarding Slava with questions.

Slava, too, had never seen Rassokhin or Kabankov or Chepelkin or Baiseitov. He knew only Rassokhin's grave on the top of the hill. But he had come to the squadron when the memory of these men was still fresh and when people spoke of them as men whom they had seen quite recently. Besides, he had seen Serov, many a time, with his own eyes.

He had seen the way Lunin and Serov fought the Messerschmitts that had attacked the station. He had accompanied Dr. Gromeko to the forest where the Messerschmitt that Serov had bagged lay. He told that story many a time, always with fresh details, and the men were never tired of hearing it. It gave Slava a share in the pilots' feats, it

gave him the right to refer in an off-hand manner to "We, Rassokhin's men."

It was from Slava indeed that the men picked up the expression "Rassokhin's men." They began referring to their squadron as the Rassokhin squadron.

Lunin was really quite surprised to notice how much pride they took in the squadron and how emotionally they spoke of the fallen pilots, their predecessors. It made him feel proud and happy, of course, but also a little sad. Sad because none of the fallen men had lived to see how famous they had become. He felt jealous, too. Rassokhin's men? These youngsters who had achieved nothing yet. Would they prove worthy of the name?

One evening in mid-July, Yermakov came into the cottage where Lunin was billeted and with a merry wink said:

"Tell me, Guards Major, how many English yards are there in a kilometre?"

"Haven't the vaguest. What do you want to know for?" replied the astonished Lunin.

"How many feet in a thousand metres? How many metres in a mile?"

"That's something I've never known."

"Well, you'll have to find out and teach others. There's a new instruction."

"What?"

"Your squadron has received instructions to learn English measurements at once. What do you think the reason is?"

Lunin felt at a dead loss. Suddenly an idea flashed in his eyes.

"That's right. You've guessed it," said Yermakov. "You're going to fly British machines."

"British!"

"Yes, Hurricanes. Have you ever seen them?"

"Never."

"No one here has. But everybody remembers those news bulletins from England: today Hurricanes shot down two

German bombers over London. They're the ones. Well, what do you say? You don't look particularly pleased. Don't worry, Konstantin Ignatyevich, they wouldn't send us bad stuff."

4

By the 27th of July the Germans had advanced as far as Rostov-on-Don.

The pilots did not talk of this. It was as though they had agreed among themselves not to mention what was happening at the fronts. But the shadow of those alarming and terrible events lay across their faces.

Curly-haired Misha Karyakin alone went on defying fate with his jokes and songs. There was a constant note of challenge in his gaiety. As the men woke up he would slyly narrow his slanting eyes and sing quietly:

Mechanics have a trained eye—
They stand by I-16 and sigh.
Do they test it? Do they true it?
Please don't ask me why they do it.

"Shut up, Karyakin," Tatarenko would say. "It's time we forgot about I-16s."

"That remains to be seen," Karyakin replied. "Maybe it's too early to start forgetting. We'll do that when the time comes."

Everyone had long since known that they were going to fly British aircraft; what they did not know was how to take the news. It put them out a little. They had been expecting new Soviet aircraft whose merits had been tried and tested. And suddenly.... Yet who knew, maybe the British aircraft were even better, the British were an inventive race.

Kostin, who knew English, told them what the English word "hurricane" meant.

"I don't know much English," he said rather shyly. "But I can find my way through English technical literature."

Kostin knew more than anyone else about Hurricanes—or rather, he was the only one who knew anything at all about them. Six months before he had read an article about them in the British journal *Aviation* and remembered a few figures. The Hurricane had come in for high praise in that article. Of the figures the most important, of course, were those which gave the aircraft's speed.

"Wizard," said Tatarenko when Kostin told him how many miles an hour the Hurricane could fly. "That's half as fast again as the I-16. Funny thing the Germans ever managed to get through to London. . . ."

From the article Kostin had learned that Hurricane fighters were powered with Merlin XX engines, manufactured by the famous firm of Rolls Royce.

"What's so famous about the firm?" Karyakin asked.

"Before the war they used to make superbly finished cars," Kostin told him. "The adverts used to say the Rolls Royce was the most expensive and uneconomical car in the world."

The advertisement surprised everyone. Tatarenko refused to believe it.

"What's the sense of an advertisement like that?" he asked.

"Sounds posh," Kostin explained. "Rolls Royce cars are designed for wealthy people and they've got to supply evidence of wealth. It's frightfully posh to run the most expensive and uneconomical car in the world."

"Are their planes the most expensive and uneconomical planes in the world too?" Karyakin asked.

Kostin frowned.

"Couldn't say," he replied drily.

He did not like making unreliable assumptions.

The pilots got down to the job of learning to convert feet into metres and metres into feet, because they were told the Hurricane's instrument board showed height and

speed in the English way. Soon they could think in feet or metres at will. Meanwhile the wireless equipment for the new aircraft arrived. To their surprise it turned out to be Soviet, made at Soviet factories. So the English had sold us their fighters without radio equipment.

Now the Hurricanes must be just round the corner. But as one baking July day followed another the Hurricanes did not arrive. Everybody was quite fed up with waiting; they did not feel like talking about them any more; they had stopped believing in them.

Then one day there was a call from the railway station to say the aircraft had arrived.

Yermakov and Lunin, accompanied by the regiment engineer, drove to the station. They took with them the mechanics and all the lorries of the transport company of the air station battalion. The road ran a long way through the forest and the lorries had many ruts to bump over; log-ways had been laid over the marshy parts and the jolts were strong enough to shake the teeth out of the travellers' jaws. All the same, the lorries went on at top speed—everybody was madly impatient to see the new aircraft.

But even when they reached the station they were not given an opportunity of seeing the planes: they were packed in large wooden crates. Ten of these crates, almost cubic in form, lay beside the railway tracks. Their white sides bore neatly drawn inscriptions in which the first words to catch the eye were the address "Port Murmansk." They had been brought all the way to Russia by the Northern route, around North Cape and across the Barents Sea.

The solid appearance of the crates made an impression on everyone and Yermakov even smacked the side of one of them and said: "Very well packed!"

The regiment engineer also seemed to find the packing to his liking. However, he said: "The boards are of our wood. They buy the timber from us, you know."

There would, of course, have been no sense in unpacking the aircraft at the railway station. So they had to be taken in their crates to the airfield. This turned out to be a difficult, cumbersome job, taking up much time. Resort had to be made to tractors and huge sledge-like constructions specially built for the occasion. It was dark and the stars were shining when the first crate arrived at the air station. They decided to open it at sunrise.

No one went to bed that night. When the sun came up, casting long shadows of pines across the whole length of the airfield, a carpenter of the station battalion climbed on top of one of the packing cases and carefully began to prize the side open with an axe. The nails squeaked and the side crashed down. The perspex hood of the cabin gleamed inside. And, drawn by the hands of the mechanics, the first of the Hurricanes slid into the light, its wheels leaving a dark track on the morning dew on the grass.

Lunin, like everyone else, scanned the aircraft with avid eyes. He knew from experience how important was the first impression one got of a new aircraft. One can nearly always recognize a successful piece of designing at first glance—according to the grace and expressiveness of line. He remembered the first time he saw an I-16, years ago. The plane had pleased him at once by its stubby bulldog nose and short wings. "That's a plane with a tight grip," he had said to himself then. "A real fighter-plane." And later experience proved him to have been correct.

The Hurricane had nothing special to distinguish it. Its lines seemed limp and vague. It looked like any other aircraft, with no special feature of its own. However, Lunin had no intention of forming any opinion about the aircraft until he had tested it. We'll see, we'll see, he thought. I-16s are out of date and haven't much speed. If these Hurricanes are really half as fast again, they can be forgiven anything.

The regiment engineer examined the engine and Lunin got into the cockpit, handled the controls and took a look

at the instrument panel. He found the cockpit cramped and uncomfortable. Depended what you were used to, though.... The instruments were not to his liking either. Only the finish was good, the abundance of glass and gleaming metal fittings, but basically it was all rather primitive. He had never expected to find this kind of instruments in a British plane. But you could still fly even with such instruments. The armament though.... The Hurricane's armament was obviously weaker than on the I-16. No, you couldn't take a sniff at a Messerschmitt with armament like that....

"Don't you look at the armament, Konstantin Ignatyevich," said Yermakov, who had been standing by the plane watching Lunin's face attentively. "We've received instructions to replace all the Hurricane's armament with more powerful stuff of our own."

Lunin made no reply. Of course, the armament had to be changed. But that would make the plane heavier and reduce its speed. However, if the Hurricane was really half as fast again as the I-16, it wouldn't matter much if they took off about ten per cent, it would still catch a Messerschmitt.

To save time they started rearming the Hurricanes immediately. Fyodorov, the regiment engineer—"the regiment Don Quixote," as he was called—like Lunin, was reserving his opinion of the Hurricanes. When anyone asked him for it he would say:

"We'll know everything when it's in flight, when it's fighting."

Fyodorov and the ground staff worked enthusiastically—their hands were itching for something to do. When they had fitted up the intercom, they started on the armament and, though this was a harder task, they completed it in a few days.

Next morning Lunin, as the most experienced of the pilots, got into the cockpit of a Hurricane and took it up.

At the flying school where he had worked before the

war, Lunin had always been the first to take every new aircraft up, so he had no qualms about his personal safety. But he was nervous about the aircraft. How would the Hurricane shape in flight? Could one fight in it?

The Hurricane took off and behaved well when it became airborne. Lunin pulled the stick back and went into a steep climb. The Hurricane climbed no worse but no better than an I-16. H'm, that meant vertical manoeuvrability would be no better than an I-16's; the Messerschmitt's, however, was better. So the Messerschmitt still had the advantage there. At six thousand five hundred feet Lunin flattened out and pulled the plane into a tight bank. H'm, the turn didn't seem quite so tight as an I-16's would have been. Anxious to test this, Lunin executed turn after turn, banking steeply to get round as quick as possible. No, there was no doubt about it, in horizontal manoeuvre the I-16 was better than the Hurricane. A pity. Lunin recalled how often he had shot down Messerschmitts by using the great fighting potential that lay in horizontal manoeuvre. But the higher the speed an aircraft was capable of, the weaker its manoeuvrability in horizontal flight. And superiority in speed was more important than anything else.

However, before testing the Hurricane's speed Lunin wanted to test another of its attributes. He felt that the Hurricane, though responsive to the pilot, was not executing everything asked of it with the same precision as the I-16. That was something very difficult to test because any inaccuracy in that field could be measured only in split seconds, in fractions of an inch.

He started stunting over the airfield. Then he went into a power-dive and came out of it into a steep climb. Then another loop, a side-slip. The aircraft responded. But there was certainly some inaccuracy. It must have something to do with the plane's design, that lack of character he had noticed. The lag was infinitesimal. A matter only of a fraction of a second. But in the air, life and death depend on no more.

Finally Lunin tested the Hurricane's speed; and here he came to the most unexpected conclusion.

He found that, contrary to all expectations, the cruising speed of the Hurricane was no greater than that of the I-16. The Hurricane got its extra speed out of a special boosting device, but the increase was only a few dozen miles an hour. This boost could only be applied for a few minutes in all and was extremely heavy on fuel, which led to a sharp reduction of the length of time the aircraft could remain in the air.

Oh no, that was much too dear a price to pay for two or three minutes of flight at a slightly increased speed.

Now everything was clear. Circling the airfield Lunin brought his plane down.

But though everything was clear to Lunin, the men who had been watching the Hurricane from the ground knew as little about it as before. The display of aerobatics that Lunin had given high over the station had been a fine sight. Without intending he had revealed to the spectators his flying ability in all its brilliance. In their enthusiasm they could not imagine that he had been performing all those miracles in an aircraft which he neither liked nor fully trusted. Yermakov, his face wreathed in smiles, was the first to run up to the plane. But his smile faded when he saw Lunin's glum face.

"Well?" he asked.

"Worse than I feared," Lunin replied.

Yermakov looked at him incredulously. He had to believe Lunin; but this time he did not seem to be quite sure.

"But can we fight in them?"

"We'll have to," replied Lunin after a moment's reflection. "There aren't enough of our own aircraft to go round and someone will have to fight in these. We've had bad luck but we'll fight."

Yermakov was thoroughly upset. He was silent for a while, then said:

"All the same, don't disappoint your boys too much. A pilot ought to believe in his aircraft."

"Why should I disappoint them?" Lunin said.

But in his thoughts he knew he would not be able to keep it from them. They would find out for themselves in the air.

5

Flying began that day. Lunin had two or three weeks in which to train his squadron for combat and to implant in the new pilots at least the elements of that enormous tactical experience which the Soviet air force had accumulated during the first year of the war.

What they needed was to fly and fly and fly. To work on all the methods until their reactions were mechanical, quite automatic. There was no time to spare, they could not afford to lose an hour. All the long summer days, from dawn till dusk, they flew in ever-changing formation, practising aerobatics, fighting mock battles, learning to shoot, landing only to take off again.

From the very first flight Lunin noted that Tatarenko flew better than the rest. He had had the same training as his comrades but he seemed to possess some specially acute sense of space which gave him the power to handle his aircraft with remarkable precision and which saved him from indecision and hesitation. Tatarenko felt at ease in the air, he suffered no nervous tension and his first reactions were so quick that he always had time in hand to plan his next move.

Tatarenko was fully aware of his superiority and that was probably his main failing. He was overbold in the air, did unnecessary rolls and turns, tried to get ahead, to surprise and draw attention to himself. Lunin punished him for that by deliberately refusing to be surprised. He made Tatarenko perform all the same exercises as the rest

although Tatarenko obviously considered them too elementary for him. Tatarenko took Lunin's comments on his flying in good heart and did everything he was ordered to do without taking the slightest offence; all the same, everything about him seemed to say: "You know very well that I fly better than anybody and you are just trying to play the schoolmaster with me. Never mind, it doesn't hurt me in the least, I wouldn't do it if I didn't respect you so much but we both know it's quite unnecessary."

Kostin, too, flew outstandingly well. Everything he knew, everything he did was sound. He was modest and careful, he took Lunin's briefings seriously and liked to reason over them. His flying, too, showed that he had a tendency to reason over every move and this made him rather slow. That was his main weakness in the air. When he ought to have acted instinctively, instantaneously, he reasoned. In working with him Lunin concentrated on teaching him to do the main movements of flying automatically, without reflection.

Khametov also shaped well in the air. This young fellow came from Krasnodar. He was of shortish build with dark girlish eyes and well-cut if rather delicate features. He was quiet-spoken and wrote to his parents in Krasnodar twice a week in beautifully neat handwriting. Both his father and mother were school-teachers; he had never parted with them before the war took him away. From the time Rostov-on-Don fell and it became clear that the Germans were marching on Krasnodar, Khametov's pleasant-looking, live-complexioned face paled every time he thought of his mother and father. Had they been evacuated or not? He stopped getting letters from them.

In the air Khametov was fearless. He studied keenly and this pleased Lunin. True, there was nothing outstanding about his style of flying but everything he was told to do he did well. Khametov flew the way he wrote—clearly, evenly, tidily. Lunin had the feeling that he would make a skilful pilot on whom one could always rely.

In the early training flights neither Karyakin nor Ryabushkin displayed any outstanding ability, but when the squadron started target practice and followed that up with mock air battles these two demonstrated an unusual accuracy, dexterity and adroitness.

A long canvas cone was drawn across the sky and the pilots came in one by one to attack it, firing at various specified distances. After each "attack" the hits were counted. Karyakin turned out to be the best marksman of them all, better even than Tatarenko, while Ryabushkin came next to Tatarenko on the list. Karyakin, however, never boasted about his success. If he happened to miss the target he was the first to laugh at himself.

"Hit the sky," he would say, and called himself "Champion sky-basher."

Karyakin liked to sing, even when flying, when he probably did not notice it himself. He was given away by the radio. Sitting in the command post Lunin often heard Karyakin's songs coming over the air while Karyakin himself was circling overhead at nine thousand feet.

It took Lunin some time to get used to the radio himself, and occasionally he found himself caught out by it. One day he and Yermakov were watching a mock battle between Karyakin and Ryabushkin over the station. The pilots were chasing each other like fighting cocks, circling and spinning, getting on each other's tail, suddenly feinting and, in general, displaying a good deal of skill, gumption and self-control. After one particularly effective attack by Karyakin, Lunin said to Yermakov: "Good man, Misha."

Suddenly he heard Karyakin's voice:

"Thanks, Comrade Guards Major."

Lunin laughed.

"That wasn't for you, Karyakin. I was speaking to the regiment commissar," he said. "Don't listen in."

Karyakin was always in high spirits and his gaiety was valued by everybody in those days when the pilots were

tired from constant practice flights and when more alarming news came from the Southern front. His jokes made the tears roll down their cheeks though the jokes were usually pretty thin and often rather old. Every morning the pilots drove from the village to the airfield in the back of a lorry. They were so crowded that they had to stand. There was a level crossing on the road, with a bar that let up and down. They had to duck their heads when the lorry went under the bar. And every morning some three hundred yards before the level crossing Karyakin would bellow, "Duck your heads."

Everybody would duck, fastest of all Tatarenko and Kostin who were the tallest. When they saw there was still a long way to go before the level crossing everybody would laugh. In spite of constant repetition this joke never failed.

Karyakin invented an amusing legend about a clueless pilot who balled everything up and by his own stupidity suffered countless mishaps, for which he blamed not himself but those who had taught him to fly. Karyakin told the story dozens of times, always adding fresh details which had a connection with some incident in real life. The most successful of his tales was about the way his legendary pilot effected a landing. He did everything a pilot should not do when he lands and Karyakin described each blunder in turn, to the accompaniment of his hearers' laughter. The landing ended in the aircraft being smashed to smithereens. When the pilot was drawn out just alive from the wreckage he was still as full of bounce as ever and merely shrugged his shoulders and said reproachfully:

"That's the way they taught me!"

These words became a catch-phrase in the squadron. Whenever anyone made a blunder, everybody yelled:

"That's the way they taught me."

"That's the way they taught me," they shouted to Ryabushkin when on landing his aircraft bounced four times. "That's the way they taught me," the pilots called to the

man of the transport company who had ditched a heavily loaded lorry. And when Tatarenko slopped his soup on to the clean table-cloth at dinner one day he told Hilda with a laugh: "That's the way they taught me."

The two who heard this phrase applied to them most often were Vadim Lazarovich and Ivan Dziga whose flying was below the standard of the others. The essential knack of flying came to them slower than to the rest and this meant that they were all the more handicapped by the speed at which the course was being given.

In contrast to the graceful but narrow-shouldered town-dweller Lazarovich, the Ukrainian collective farmer Ivan Dziga possessed a very broad chest and the muscles of a blacksmith. No one in the squadron could match his strength but that strength was of no use to him because he was unusually clumsy. His great hands would grope helplessly in the cockpit, not knowing what to grasp. Like Lazarovich he was very depressed by his failures. But both of them were determined to stick it out. They had decided to become fighter-pilots and worked stubbornly and tirelessly to that end.

Lunin split up the whole squadron into pairs and decided which pilot was to be the leader and which his second in each pair. This classification of leader and second could not, of course, but cause some stir among the pilots. However, in almost all cases Lunin's motives were clear to them; they accepted his choice as fair and in their heart of hearts agreed with it. For instance, no one could object to Kuznetsov being made a leader pilot—after all he was the only one of them, Lunin apart, who had been under fire. And it was altogether fair that the clumsy lout Ostrosablin, who flew so indifferently, should be made Kuznetsov's second. Everybody agreed that Karyakin ought to lead and Ryabushkin follow him. It was impossible, too, to quarrel with Lunin's decision to make Kostin and Khametov leaders and Lazarovich and Dziga seconds. Only one of his decisions seemed puzzling to many of them. Lunin

made Ilya Tatarenko a second. True, he made him his own second, the second of the squadron commander, but all the same a second.

Was it an honour for Tatarenko? Or had he been treated unfairly? That was what worried the young pilots. Khametov, for instance, asserted that Tatarenko had been greatly honoured. He himself had been appointed a leader but would have considered himself lucky to be Lunin's second. Khametov took to people rather easily and now felt drawn to Lunin, who had stirred his imagination almost the first time he saw him. He considered Lunin impeccable, he made him his model in everything and blushed with joy whenever Lunin spoke to him.

Ryabushkin on the other hand said that Tatarenko of all people ought to be a leader. Ryabushkin himself was second to Karyakin and was not in the least disappointed about it; but he did feel disappointed for Tatarenko. Ryabushkin, too, liked Lunin, quite enthusiastically in fact, and was proud to serve under an officer like him. But he was no less enthusiastic about Tatarenko. Tatarenko had made a great impression on him at the training school where they had met and become friends. In that friendship Tatarenko, of course, always took the lead while modest little Ryabushkin marvelled at the virtues of his friend and never jibbed at his secondary role in their relations. And now, suddenly, Tatarenko had become a second just like him, Ryabushkin, or Ivan Dziga.... Ryabushkin could not understand that at all.

Only Lazarovich found Lunin's decision quite understandable.

"Don't you get it?" he said. "He's made Tatarenko his second so that he won't get stuck-up."

Lazarovich like everyone else was on excellent terms with Tatarenko and fully gave him his due; all the same he insisted that Tatarenko tended to be vain.

Lunin, of course, would like to have known how Tatarenko himself was taking the matter. Tatarenko, however,

gave no hint of his feelings on the subject. He still smiled, flashing his strong white teeth, while his eyes seemed to be saying: You honourable old dreamer. You can do what you like with me, I'll submit to everything because none of that is of the slightest importance. You know yourself I'm a first-class pilot and all set for glory.

Perhaps that was not exactly what Tatarenko thought, but that was how it seemed to Lunin. If there is a dreamer here, it's you, he thought. You don't know how merciless war is. War punishes savagely those who give themselves airs, who go zooming ahead, who are out for personal and not for general glory. You, my lad, feel yourself terribly strong. You're probably right, too, but you'll be shot down in your first fight if I don't take care of you. . . .

Truth to tell, Lunin himself was as attracted to Ilya Tatarenko as Ryabushkin. Perhaps even more so, because he could appreciate his worth more than Ryabushkin could. He liked his skill in the air, his speed and inventiveness and the clarity of his decisions during flight. He could unerringly pick out Tatarenko's aircraft among many others in the sky—by the sheer perfection of his turns. To fly like that one had really to be in love with flying, to have a deep devotion for it.

There were many reasons why Lunin made Ilya Tatarenko his second. In the first place he was dead against the views of the young, inexperienced pilots that the second's job was easier than the leader's and for that reason required less flying skill. Serov, for example, had first been Rassokhin's second, then Lunin's, yet Lunin had considered him one of the ablest pilots in the squadron. Further, Tatarenko was gifted and it is always more interesting to have a gifted pupil to teach. Then, Lunin was convinced that Tatarenko, with his self-assurance, needed a firmer hand to restrain him than the others. He felt more anxious for Tatarenko than for the rest and wanted to have him close by all the time.

Lunin had singled out Tatarenko from the rest; but he

was anxious that no one should suspect him of showing the man any favours and so he was more official and strict in manner to him than to the others, praising him less and reprimanding him more often. As a result, many people thought he did not like Tatarenko and that he had a down on him.

Lunin knew how to hide his feelings. Hilda, however, did not.

She blushed so hard at the sight of Tatarenko, she grew so confused and flustered when he spoke to her, she was in such a hurry to hand him the cruet that no one could fail to notice it. The pilots certainly noticed it but dared not comment—Hilda had known the old Rassokhin heroes! What could she find in young Tatarenko, a fellow who had never even fought?

Lazarovich alone had sufficient effrontery to voice his observations.

"She's fallen for you, Ilya," he said. "You can always count on a second helping now."

Lunin, too, noticed something and looked at Hilda with astonishment. Final confirmation of the correctness of his suspicion came when Hilda's attitude to Tatarenko took a sudden change. She ceased to notice him, kept her eyes lowered in his presence and did not say a word; she ran off to the kitchen when he came into the mess; her hands trembled when she placed a bowl of soup in front of him.

Lunin found all this rather unpleasant. Maybe it was because Baiseitov had been in love with Hilda, then Chepelkin and—who knows?—perhaps others, too. She had been friends with them all, but not in love with any of them. When he thought of Hilda, Lunin always recalled the fairy-tale about the princess who lived in the forest with twelve brothers. The brothers went out hunting and the princess stayed at home and kept house for them. The princess fell in love with nobody; if she had done so the fairy-tale would have come to an end.

The strangest thing about all this was that Tatarenko

remained quite indifferent to Hilda's charms. None of the people using the air-crew mess paid less attention to her. Her pretty little face with the blue eyes and milk-and-roses complexion, her slender waist and fair silky curls made absolutely no impression on him. He was the only man not to notice what all the rest, including Lunin, noticed. Her special attention and even her special lack of attention to him passed him by. He simply never looked at her and ate the soup she set before him just as if the bowl had appeared on the table by itself.

6

That summer was unusually hot in north Russia. There seemed to be no end to the baking sunny days. Everything dried up, dust swirled from the roads, there was a forest fire somewhere near, the air was full of acrid smoke. The sky over the air station was grey with dust and smoke and the sun looked red and huge. In the heat, the dust and the smoke, under that big red sun, the aircraft took off and landed unceasingly.

Lunin made his pilots repeat every exercise time and time again. If a man made a faulty landing he would have to take off again and go on landing until he had made ten or twenty perfect three-point landings in succession. During those days the pilots' faces became drawn, they lost weight, they became dark from the sun and the dust. They had lost the strength and the will to play leap-frog or give Slava a tossing; it was dark before they got back from the airfield and they would just flop into bed and sleep soundly and dreamlessly; at break of day they would be awakened by the orderly, snatch breakfast and drive to the airfield.

Lunin, too, grew tired, thin, sunburned and grimed with dust. He kept removing his helmet and wiping away the big beads of sweat that oozed out of his bald sumburned

brow. He was entirely absorbed in the work and the days passed rapidly, giving him no time for sleep or meals or to take a look round and reflect. August had come; any day now they might be ordered to the front. They had to work, work and work.

As a veteran flying instructor Lunin enjoyed this training work; he felt sure of himself and put all his being into it; he liked to feel the blazing heat of the airfield, to see the daisies and clover heads tossing under the whirling propeller, he liked to see those young, eager faces around him.

During all those weeks he had only one opportunity of getting away on his own and thinking of things not immediately related to his squadron.

It happened by pure chance. For many days he had been toying with the idea of taking a few minutes off to bathe in the river. One day he left the airfield half an hour before the others and had an early lunch. He walked from the mess to the edge of the village where no one would see him and ran down the steep green bank to the dark waters.

It was years since he had bathed in a river. Back in the days of his childhood, his youth. For a long time in pre-war days he had bathed only in the heavy, green and not fully refreshing waters of the sea. But he had forgotten nothing, and he was delighted to find that everything was just like it used to be—the broad leaves of the water-lilies, the deep shadow of the willows, the dry rustle of the bulrushes, the schools of tiny fish which moved all at once like an obedient flotilla, and out there, ahead, where the water was deepest, the glitter of the silvery stream.

He slipped out of his clothes and dived in. He felt a thrill of pleasure as his over-heated body sank into the cold water that lay darkly under the overhanging branches. He felt the water streaming between his toes. The current embraced him with gentle firmness, turned his body over and carried him along. He offered no resistance. The water

closed over his head and for a few seconds he let himself sink till he felt his heels touch the soft bed of the river. He did not close his eyes and could see above him the branches of the trees refracted by the rippling surface of the water, and a rocking sun between the branches. He made a stroke or two with his arms, surfaced, swam overarm to mid stream, took a look round and swam back to the bank puffing happily.

The river had washed away his weariness and worries together with the sweat and the dust. As he was dressing he noticed for the first time that the whole bank above him was thickly overgrown with wild raspberry bushes; he could see the plump little berries in every clump of leaves. Without thinking he clambered up the bank and began to pick and eat the berries. He had not picked wild raspberries since he was a little boy, when he used to wander for hours in the forest looking for them. Oblivious of everything else, quite in the grip of this suddenly revived passion, he moved from clump to clump plunging deep into the undergrowth. The berries, little red Chinese lanterns, had hard white cores from which he peeled them with nimble fingers and put them to his lips. His fingertips soon grew pink from the rosy juice.

The little lanterns of berries and the pink tips of his fingers evoked a multitude of memories. After all, he was quite near his native town, not much more than sixty miles from the place where he was born. That little town also lay on a river and that river had steep green banks, too, and the same sort of forest and raspberry bushes. People spoke with the same accent as they did in this village, the way Lunin himself spoke—in the chopped northern manner. He remembered the main street of the little town with a white stone church closing one end and an older, smaller timber church at the other, behind which the cemetery stretched. There was nothing much else in the town besides the main street—just suburbs, really no different from a village, with thickets of elder bushes in one

of which stood a shed where Lunin was making his first model aeroplane. He had never seen a real aeroplane except in pictures, but oh, how much food for thought and heart-burning those pictures had given him, how he had dreamed of flying.... He recalled the faces of the neighbours, of his parents, of the little boys and girls, his childhood companions. Where were they now? How were they faring? Would he recognize them if he were to see them now? Maybe some of them were still living in that little town. He suddenly remembered the girls he had once been keen on. He had remembered them for a long time but when he met Lisa he had forgotten them all and not thought about them again until now. If only he had a few hours of liberty, he could drive over to the town. But there was no time, and there would be none in the future. Maybe he could fly there and skim the roof tops? No, that would be foolish, a pure whim.

Would he recognize his native town from the air? Reference points: the two churches, the curve in the river, the wooden bridge on piles. But would that bridge still be there? He had heard they'd built a metal span-bridge. During the second five-year plan period a glass works had been put up, too—he had read about that in the papers. The big church had probably gone.... Funny thing, he had dreamed of flying so often when he lived there but had never once seen the town from the air. He had flown over hundreds of towns, yet never over his own birthplace.

The raspberries growing on the steep river bank linked his past with the present. With a sense of joy he suddenly saw his life as a whole. Here, in this district, cut off from the world by forests, the dream of flying had once come to him as a little boy, and he had devoted his whole life to the fulfilment of that dream. How much he had flown! And had he ever regretted it? Never. Not once. All his happiness was in the air. Only in the air did he feel himself worth something, strong. And how many friends he

had made just because he could fly! He knew how to fly—and that had made him useful to his country and taught him how to defend it.

Lunin suddenly glanced at his watch. He hurried to the top of the bank, breaking down the brittle raspberry bushes as he went. There in the sun stood Khromykh, now Lunin's orderly as he had once been Rassokhin's. He had been sent to find the squadron leader and report to him that the lorry for the airfield was waiting. Khromykh had been standing there at the top of the slope some time watching Lunin eating raspberries. He had not wanted to disturb him.

On August 16 the Red Army withdrew from Maikop. Three days later Krasnodar, Khametov's native town, fell.

The days grew shorter and cooler, there were more frequent showers and the first yellow strands appeared on the birch-trees. One morning a U-2 touched down on the airfield and from it stepped Uvarov. Everybody interpreted the arrival of the division commissar in the same way. It meant they would soon be going to the front.

Uvarov, however, did not at once reveal the reason for his trip, not even to Yermakov and Lunin. He began, as usual, by talking about trifling everyday things—he was interested in the way the mess was being run, in the issue of uniforms and linen. He enquired whether newspapers and magazines were arriving regularly and what articles from the Moscow press were being discussed in current-affairs talks. He spoke to everyone, he enquired about everything, he made a point of getting to know strangers.

"How is Kuznetsov getting on?" he asked Lunin and Yermakov among other things.

Lunin, who knew that Yermakov did not like Kuznetsov, hurried to reply:

"He flies well."

"How's his discipline?" asked Uvarov.

"All right so far," said Yermakov grimly.

Uvarov spent two days at the station watching the flying. He drove to the field with the pilots and drove back with them. After each flight he called the pilots to him and questioned them in detail about the flight. The pilots soon lost their nervousness and spoke to him frankly and animatedly.

Among other things he asked them whether they liked their new aircraft. The pilots, however, were reluctant to talk about the merits of the Hurricanes and answered him vaguely. Only Tatarenko spoke out.

"How can I tell?" he said.

"What do you mean?" said Uvarov with surprise. "You're flying one, aren't you?"

"But we've nothing to compare them with," Tatarenko said. "It's not as though we'd seen any aircraft. You'd better ask Major Lunin, he's got something to compare them with."

Yermakov always listened attentively when Uvarov was making enquiries about the Hurricanes. He had not wholly made up his mind about the aircraft. There were times when he thought Lunin's verdict on them partial and unjust. He saw how much success the young pilots had achieved in their few weeks' training. Yermakov was neither a pilot nor a mechanic, he had never completed a flying course. But he had served many years in the air force and flew a U-2. He was fully qualified to evaluate the pilots' success, he saw clearly that they were flying far better in August than when they had started in July. Could there be anything wrong with the aircraft if the pilots had achieved such good results with them? And anyway, was it at all likely that British aircraft were not so good as Soviet ones?

He felt that Lunin's attitude towards the Hurricanes, even if partly justified, could only do harm. It certainly would not be easy for a young pilot to fly an aircraft if

he guessed that his commanding officer considered it below standard.

Yermakov poured out all his doubts to Uvarov without reservations. He got a special satisfaction out of the phrase: "A pilot ought to trust his aircraft," for it was Uvarov, not he, who had coined that phrase and he had heard it on Uvarov's lips some months before though in a different connection.

Uvarov smiled.

"But if the aircraft doesn't justify that trust, what then?" he asked.

"It seems to me, Comrade Division Commissar, that our young pilots have full confidence in their aircraft," said Yermakov. "Why, you asked them about it yourself and not one of them complained or said there was anything wrong with his aircraft."

"Aye, not one of them did that," said Uvarov. "No one said a thing." He seemed very pleased.

On the third day of his stay Uvarov announced that the squadron was to return to Lake Ladoga immediately—to the same air station where it had spent the winter. While One and Three Squadrons would replace them at this rear station to take over new pilots and aircraft.

CHAPTER NINE

Sinyavino

1

Sonya was rarely at home these days and had grown quite unaccustomed to her abandoned fifth-floor flat. She was still working in the Komsomol team, which had repaired the public baths during the previous winter, and generally spent the night with the other girls wherever

they happened to be working. Antonina Trofimovna was still in charge.

The composition of the team had changed much—two girls had died in early spring and many of the others had been evacuated across Lake Ladoga. But replacements came to fill the gaps and Sonya, one of the youngest members of the team, was one of its veterans.

The team had no fixed programme of work. It did what happened to be the most important thing to do at any given time.

During the spring and summer it devoted most of its time and efforts to the vegetable plots.

As soon as the snow melted, the people of Leningrad started digging up the earth in every vacant plot, in the gardens and yards and city squares. Leningrad by then had no outskirts—the enemy were there—and so the vegetables had to be planted in the centre of the city. Neatly dug vegetable beds ran in all directions round the anti-aircraft guns standing in the middle of the Marsovo Polye. Every place was dug up—the Tavrichesky and Mikhailovsky Gardens, the islands in the delta of the Neva, all those unfaced embankments of the many little rivers intersecting the city, in short, every patch of land free from stone or asphalt was dug up, sown, planted.

In addition to bread the people of Leningrad received rations of cereal, and a little meat, butter and sugar. But they got no vegetables because the transport of vegetables to Leningrad presented the most difficult problem of all—they were too bulky. Every sack of provisions shipped to Leningrad had to be loaded twice, first from railway vans into barges and then from barges back into vans. "Potatoes are non-transportable," they said in the quartermaster's department of the Leningrad front. However, people had to have vegetables. They made soup out of nettles, and cordials out of pine needles. And in the spring they became vegetable gardeners.

A sufficient amount of seed potatoes and various sorts

of vegetable seeds was brought in. There were two kinds of vegetable gardens—private ones, which belonged to separate families, and public ones which belonged to various organizations and trade unions or to the municipality. The allotment on which the Komsomol team worked was attached to the district Soviet and the crop was intended to provide for the child care institutions in the district. It occupied a large plot of waste land bounded on three sides by the brick walls of houses and opening on the fourth side to the embankment of one of the arms of the Neva delta.

Nothing, not even weeds, had grown on this plot for a century. Until the girls arrived it was all rolled flat and covered with rubbish. Before they could start digging they had to spend several days picking up rubble. Then they found that the ground had no desire to yield to their spades. Whenever they tried to drive a spade into the soil it struck a brick or an iron hoop or a sheet of tin. Every handful of this earth contained shards of pottery or splinters of glass. Enough bones were excavated every minute to reconstruct the skeletons of all the animals, birds and fish that the inhabitants of the city had eaten since the time of Peter the Great. At first the girls thought it was going to take them the whole summer and more to clean and loosen the soil in their plot. However, little by little they adapted themselves to it, settled down to the job and within a week had the whole place dug. The only trouble was that the beds looked as though they had been sprinkled with salt—this was the glitter of tiny splinters of glass.

By the summer Leningrad was quite empty. Most of the population had been evacuated. The great city of brick and mortar had a bare sixth of its original inhabitants. The streets were deserted; you would turn a corner into some long straight street, scan it from end to end and be surprised to find not a soul on the pavements. Grass grew between the cobblestones and the dismal whine of mosquitoes was heard in the very centre of the city where they had not ventured since the 18th century. Silence

reigned over the solid bulk of the houses, palaces and churches, a silence broken only rarely by the clanking of a solitary tram crossing a bridge ten streets away, or by the explosion of a shell bursting in the city and sending up a cloud of smoke, dust and rubble. And up above, beyond the gently swaying balloon barrage the sky glowed with the long summer sunsets which changed so imperceptibly into the dawns of new days. The tender light was reflected in every window which had not yet been broken, in all the canals and rivers.

The remote northern part of Vasilyevsky Island where the girls had their allotment was even more deserted and silent than the city centre. Feeling certain that nobody would see them, the girls stripped almost to the skin when they grew hot. And if the sun baked them too hard they would all drop their spades and run to the bank of the river and bathe there on the spot, joking and laughing and splashing in the unbearably cold water and paying no attention to the sentry on the wooden bridge who stared down at them.

The earth grew green with the first shoots and the time came when the allotment had to be guarded at night. They built a kind of hut out of rough old weather-beaten planks and there every night two or three girls took it in turns to keep watch. This was a duty which everybody was keen to undertake. Sometimes another two or three girls would stay to keep their friends company—"to keep their spirits up" as they said—but really to be able to spend the whole transparent, light night in talk, and then suddenly drop off into the soundest of sweet slumber, huddled together on the straw. It was never stuffy in the shed because the wind streamed through the cracks between the planks, so wide that the pale remote stars peeped in. Occasionally a shell would go woofing over the hut and explode—sometimes far away, sometimes quite near. If it woke them up the girls would start guessing where it had fallen—on a near-by house, or on the bridge or in the park across the

river—and whether it had started a fire. But no one would feel like going outside and they would fall off to sleep again. They became accustomed to the sound of explosions and were far more alarmed by faint rustling sounds and barely audible scratching.

They knew very well what caused that rustling and scratching. It was the rats.

The winter of famine had left Leningrad without a horse, a pigeon, a dog, a single cat. Even the crows and ravens had gone, even sparrows were rare. Only the rats had not abandoned the city or perished. And with the advent of warm weather the rats left the deserted houses where there was nothing for them to live on and came into the open air. They made bold attacks on the allotments, nosing among the beds and grubbing up the carefully sliced seed potatoes which were already putting out shoots; later they did not disdain even the leaves. The long-tailed mangy vermin would run under the girls' feet and make them scream with disgust. The team fought stubbornly and ruthlessly with the rats, sometimes winning, sometimes suffering defeat. Near the door of the night-watchmen's hut there was always a heap of stones, broken bricks and shards ready for throwing. During the night the girls would often dash out all together, as from a beleaguered fortress and, shouting loudly, leap among the vegetable beds scattering the rats. But there were times when the rats drove them back into the hut.

Rats notwithstanding, the potato plants grew higher and thicker. One job succeeded another—earthing-up, weeding. In August the potatoes flowered. By then, however, the team had many things to do besides tending their allotment.

In August began the collection of firewood for the coming winter. There was no coal or firewood left in the city. There could be no question of bringing in fuel supplies across Lake Ladoga with the two loading operations involved, and all the surrounding forests were in German

hands. Firewood had to be found in the city itself, and found it was. It was decided to pull down and use for firewood all the timber-built houses on the edge of Leningrad.

At that time most of these houses were unoccupied. Those tenants that remained were moved to the centre of the city and lodged in empty flats in the brick buildings. And then the work began.

Antonina Trofimovna's team of girls was given work in a part of the city known as Novaya Derevnya. This district had whole streets of one- and two-storey wooden houses. At the district Soviet the girls received crowbars, axes, saws, and wheelbarrows and off they went to Novaya Derevnya over the broad bridges and along the empty avenues of the green parks on the islands.

They went with some reluctance, for the work ahead of them did not particularly appeal to them. Not because it promised to be hard but because they did not want to have a part in the destruction of their native city. They were even a little ashamed of the job they had been given; turning houses into firewood was nothing to boast about. And what upset them the more was the sight of those houses, crooked and decrepit and long unpainted but all the same intact and showing traces of quite recent occupancy.

Each house had its front garden which grew deserted dahlias and asters. Each one had its cosy little bird box on a tall pole. The sun was shining, stunted mountain ash-trees cast their shadows on the well-worn steps of the little porches. Everything around was still and silent, but there was a feeling in the air that the occupants of the house might return any moment and that children's voices might ring out again at any time.

Antonina Trofimovna, however, was not in the least put out by all that. She cast her eyes casually and disdainfully over the little wooden houses with their gardens and bird boxes. She had noticed the misgivings of her team for some time but did not share them at all herself.

"Just look at the dirt! They're all rotten and rubbishy," she said curtly, striding firmly along the duck-boards with a heavy crowbar in her hands. "Stuffy little bug-traps! Disease breeders! They're a blot on the city. They ought to have been pulled down years ago. Do you think human beings ought to live in places like this? The war's helping us to do a lot of clearing up. Just see the new houses we'll build here one day."

"New houses! Here?"

"Of course. Eight-storey houses.... Come on, let's get on with it."

She lunged with her crowbar at the thick beam that served as part of the foundation of a two-storey house. The crowbar sunk into the wood without meeting any resistance, just as if it had been made of cardboard, and a stream of dry dust cascaded to the ground.

The girls' spirits rose; among the scene of general destruction which they had seen around them for a whole year Antonina Trofimovna's words about building new houses sounded astonishing. That meant there was going to be a time when they would be building, not pulling down, didn't it? And now, too, they were not just destroying, they were turning rubbish into firewood and clearing places for future new houses....

All autumn they dismantled wooden houses, sawing up the rotten worm-eaten beams and stacking firewood. Meanwhile they went on working at the vegetable plot. And at the end of September when, at length, they had dug up their potatoes and turned them in at the local Soviet they were given another important task to fulfil—the repair of the water mains.

During the previous winter, just when the frosts were most intense, the water mains had stopped working and in many places the pipes had burst. During the whole summer work went on to get the mains in order again but all the experienced plumbers were at the front, there were not enough skilled hands and the repairs marked time. In the

autumn when there was a danger that some parts of the water system might not be ready by the winter many workers were assigned to the job, including the girls of the Komsomol team. They knew nothing of the job and had no experience so they could work only as other workers' mates.

When they were digging potatoes or dismantling houses the girls were in the open air—out in the sun or the rain. Now they had to drop down into the mains, into a dark, damp cavernous world. As when she had helped to build the air-raid shelter the year before, this gloomy subterranean hidden world struck Sonya by its immensity. It was a whole city, mysterious, unseen, existing as close as could be to the city everybody could see quite clearly. And now this secret city revealed itself to her on a much broader scale than the year before, she had to work in its depths for several months, get to know its twisted maze of streets and study its laws.

At first, like all the girls from the team, she was put on to the simplest jobs—she dragged heavy lead pipes, bailed stinking water, handed tools to the plumbers. The plumbers were lads of eighteen, some a year or two younger even. They behaved with a great deal of self-importance, spoke in deep voices when they ever spoke at all, smoked coarse tobacco, walked with a lurch, clumping with their heavy boots. However, they were anything but tall, occasionally their bass voices would shoot up the scale and their boots were so large for their feet that sometimes they threatened to come right off them. But they had been working since the spring, they had been taught by experienced hands and there was nothing about plumbing they did not know. The girls might laugh at them, but they respected them for their ability and obeyed them.

Of all the things that the boy plumbers could do nothing appealed to Sonya more than welding. The bright noisy flame blazing in the darkness and capable of softening even the hardest of metals to a glowing paste seemed

to her full of beauty, mystery and might. When the welding gun burst into flame everything around took on a pale blue theatrical light that transformed the grimy underworld into a magnificent palace hall. And the way two broken ends of tubing could be joined with its help so snugly that no one could even tell where the joint was—well, that was pure magic!

Sonya dogged the footsteps of the important young fellow with the welding torch; she fulfilled all his orders; she allowed him to bawl at her and submitted to all his remarks. His pale childish face was almost entirely concealed by his huge dark protective goggles. He spoke to Sonya in a superior manner, as befitted a real foreman, although she outmeasured him in height. However, he could not but value her zeal and was soon insisting that Sonya be his mate and no one else.

Sonya got herself a pair of the same sort of goggles as the welder wore and he used to let her hold the tube he was welding, but it was a long time before he let her even touch the welding torch itself. Incidentally, with the passage of time, he gradually lost his superciliousness: it seemed to melt. When Sonya asked him anything he first screwed up his nose, which was his way of expressing his complete lack of confidence in her ability to understand, but after that he did explain something of the secrets of his art. The chief of these secrets consisted in knowing that a flame has layers and that every layer has a different temperature. He asserted that the whole art of welding was based on knowing the right order in which to use the blue, yellow and white layers of the flame.

At last he allowed Sonya to weld two lengths of piping and Sonya became a welder. To begin with she worked only with her teacher but then they were separated and she started working on her own.

Engrossed in this underground work she did not notice how a considerable part of the autumn had passed. And

she was surprised when coming up out of a main into a yard one day she noticed light snow-flakes falling slowly on the whitening earth.

2

Sonya was now going around in slacks—Antonina Trofimovna had got her a man's blue overalls and she wore them all the time. The overalls had long ceased to be blue under their coating of soot and oil, rust and clay. There was always a pair of pincers or a hammer or a coil of copper wire sticking out from their huge sagging pockets. Thin, long-legged Sonya was often mistaken for a boy. For some reason she did not like this and she started wearing her faded kerchief round her dark short hair, so as to have at least something girlish about her.

In work and ability she was far from being the last in the team but she was its youngest member. The team was still called a Komsomol team, but during the summer several grown-up women joined it, including some who could scarcely be described as young. As for the girls, most of them were two or three years older than Sonya; as a result she involuntarily kept to herself a little, though she was on friendly terms with all.

It was a peculiarly feminine world, one with which Sonya could not fully associate herself. The older women had husbands at the front, the girls, fiancés or sweethearts with whom they exchanged letters. Separation and the uncertainty of reunion raised their love above the commonplace, made it something heroic and lofty. Their stubborn, selfless work also had some connection with love: they wanted to be worthy of the men they loved.

Whenever anyone received a letter the news immediately ran round the whole team. Married women who received letters from their husbands reacted laconically to the questions.

"Well, what does he write?" someone would ask.

"That he's still alive," would be the reply.

But when the girls received letters they would hand them round for their friends to read, and discuss their contents endlessly. These contents were mainly about love and that was a subject they certainly could talk about.

Sonya saw that they all considered love something extremely important. There was a girl in the team called Nyura, generally referred to as Lovely Nyura to distinguish her from several other Nyuras. Lovely Nyura was a blonde with a well-developed figure, a pleasant round face and eyes the colour of forget-me-nots. The boy she was in love with was in a battalion posted somewhere near Pulkovo, only a few miles outside the city. Sometimes, about once a month, he managed to slip into Leningrad. Wherever the team might be working, he would find it and call for Nyura. His arrival always caused a general commotion and threw everybody into a flurry.

"Nyura! Nyura! Where's Nyura?" the girls would cry, "Vasya's come for her." And they would scatter in all directions looking for Nyura.

Nyura, looking happy and shy, would wipe her big hands on a damp rag and walk up to Vasya, an insignificant fellow, whose head came up only to her shoulder and whose greatcoat was far too big for him. They would go off together. The team resumed its work while Nyura was out with her young man but it never entered anybody's head to reproach her. Even Antonina Trofimovna only smiled when she saw Lovely Nyura go off with Vasya, and never uttered a word of reprimand. In that feminine world love was respected and enjoyed its own rights. Nyura would stroll till dusk fell, but she never grew tired and when she got back among her friends she would talk all night about her feelings. To Nyura herself, as to her listeners, everything she felt seemed remarkable and extraordinarily interesting. Her love for Vasya had its ups and downs; sometimes she even asserted that she had quite fallen out of love with him but then in their alarm the girls would talk her back into

a state of love and she would repent and swear eternal vows. Every time he visited her, Vasya brought her a parcel of fruit-drops—they got them instead of sugar at his unit—which he had collected for a whole month. Kind-hearted, generous Nyura would hand the fruit-drops around among her friends. The girls thought they had a special flavour because they were not ordinary fruit-drops, they were fruit-drops sanctified by love.

Sonya listened to all this fuss about love but never took part in the talk and was at first even rather surprised that her older friends should spend so much time on it. She never thought about love. Before the war she used to assert stubbornly that not for anything in the world would she ever get married; and she meant what she said. Generally speaking, in those days she did not understand what made girls marry. During the year that had passed since then her knowledge of life had widened considerably, and now, of course, she would not think of repeating childish nonsense of that sort. She had seen too many things during that year not to understand what words like family, husband, wife and children meant for people. All the same she did not join in the talk about love and was quite put out when anybody hinted to her that she was in love herself or had an admirer.

Her girl friends were very free with hints and suggestions of that sort. For instance they imagined that the young fellow who had taught Sonya welding was keen on her. They teased her good-naturedly about him. And although Sonya knew it was all a lot of nonsense, without the slightest foundation of truth, and that the girls themselves did not believe what they were saying and attached no importance to it, she none the less detested their teasing and got angry and sulky.

The trouble was that she had suddenly realized that she was not at all pretty and that no one could possibly fall in love with her.

Before, she had never thought whether she was pretty

or not. There was just no point in it. She had owned pretty hair ribbons, pretty jumpers, pretty shoes, but it had never entered her head to wonder whether she herself was pretty or not. She was simply Sonya and that was the end of it. But suddenly she seemed to be looking at herself from a distance and she convinced herself that she was not pretty.

Her face might have passed—it was a face like any other face. But the matter lay not only in the face. Now she could not get away from the idea of herself as a clumsy, awkward, lanky girl. And this suddenly aroused feeling of awkwardness was so strong that she involuntarily blushed every time anyone looked at her.

If only she had something left to wear. But except for her grubby overalls she had nothing because she had grown out of all the frocks her mother had made for her before the war. And just look at her hands! Rough, covered with sores and indelible brown stains. Silly even to think that anybody would give her a second thought.

Anyway, it was not as though she wanted anybody to. Not in the least! Let those girls go on whispering all the time about love, she had other things to think about. And Sonya would toss her head proudly, the way her grandfather used to. The very idea!

After all, was there really anything fine about love? Did it make you happy to be in love? Every girl or woman whom Sonya saw around her was separated from the person she loved, pined for him, was out of her wits with worry. They were as lonely for their loved ones as Sonya was for her mother.

Mummy was dead. Grandad was dead, gone for ever.... To tell the truth, Sonya could not believe that was true. Of course, she understood she would never see them again but in her mind she went on having long conversations with them.

Especially with Mummy.

At night, when all was quiet, Sonya would in her mind

tell her mother everything she had seen, everything she had felt during the day. She was so used to doing this that many things came clear to her only after she had held these nocturnal talks with her mother. And her mother would answer her, sitting on the edge of the bed, and when Sonya fell off to sleep, she would turn into a real mother, living and warm. Awakening, Sonya would recall everything and grow cold with grief in a new paroxysm of the old familiar longing.

Of the living she longed most for Slava. Funny, when they lived together Sonya had never suspected she was so fond of him. They often quarrelled before the war, scrapped, even, despite the considerable difference in their ages. And now she was always missing him and as time went on she missed him even more. She worried about him incessantly and was thoroughly upset if she did not get letters from him regularly.

She had insisted that he write to her once a week. Slava, of course, was not capable of being so methodical but Sonya did receive two letters a month from him. They had a good reliable connection through Sharapov. But most of Slava's letters were short and too simple, altogether lacking in feeling. Slava was of an age when he considered it unmanly to show any feelings whatsoever. So his letters would often begin simply: "Hullo, Sonya!" or even just with a "How are you? I am well." Sonya was not at all hurt because she did not expect anything else from Slava and such phrases did help her to recall his voice. As for his feelings, she had no doubt about them for he showed them in other ways. Sometimes, together with a letter, Sharapov would give her a neatly made parcel containing rusks of black bread. When she popped the first of these rusks into her mouth it took her a long time to swallow the crumbs—her throat was too full of unshed tears.

At first her longings for Slava were modified by a feeling of satisfaction that he was at the air station—there, at least, he was getting plenty to eat. But later, when the food

problem became less acute, her anxiety took many forms and grew from day to day. When she wrote to him she asked him whether he took regular baths, kept his head free of lice, and went to the hairdresser's. She enquired after his linen, she asked him whether his boots leaked, whether he kept his feet dry. But she never received a reply to a single one of her questions; Slava evidently considered them beneath him and, instead, briefly described various happenings at the station which meant nothing to her, because she could not picture life there.

Oh, how wonderful it would be to go there, to spend a day there, to see him and find out everything about the way he was living, to see he was comfortable. But Sonya dared not even dream of the possibility. Who would give her permission to go there? What excuse had she for going?

In fact it was not only for Slava's sake that she wanted to go to the air base.

Slava's letters contained frequent descriptions of air battles, couched in the most incomprehensible technical terminology. Not one of his letters avoided terms like fuselage, spin, aileron, magneto, immelmann turn, bank, three-point landing. Sonya did not even try to puzzle out the meaning of these words, for she assumed that Slava only used them to add an air of importance to his letters. But the names of the people he mentioned stuck in her mind. Not all of them, of course, but those which recurred most often. She knew, for instance, that Yermakov was the regiment commissar, that Lunin was a squadron leader and that Ilya Tatarenko was a marvellous pilot, a hero, and, besides that, Slava's best friend.

She had never been interested in aviation before, maybe precisely because Slava was so fond of it. She considered aeroplanes to be among all those silly things that little boys always get a passion for.... That was how she had felt about it before the war.

But during the war her attitude to aircraft and pilots changed. How often had she stood, riveted to the ground,

watching an air battle over the city with those minute metal birds flashing in and out of the clouds and suddenly sparkling in the sun? How often, as she watched, had her emotions swung in a few seconds from alarm to despair, from despair to hope, to joy, to rapture? How many times had she listened to the crackle of machine-guns borne by the wind and making her think of the terrible significance of those sounds. Up there in the vast expanse of the sky daring men were fighting furiously.

Pilots!

To all the girls in the Komsomol team this word had a specially majestic and splendid ring. The girls were firmly convinced that even sailors, even the men of the tanks could not be compared with pilots. Every one of the girls was exchanging letters with someone or other at the front but not one of them had managed to get into correspondence with a pilot. They were keenly interested in the letters Sonya received from her brother for the sole reason that the lad lived at an air station. They were not in the least interested in Slava himself but the fact that he was surrounded by pilots cast a special light on Slava and even on Sonya.

As she heard with what interest the girls talked about pilots Sonya found herself thinking of them more frequently.

She tried to imagine the people Slava wrote about in his letters. That was not easy because Slava never described anything distinctive about his friends. Tatarenko's name attracted Sonya's attention least of all because of that nickname of his—Ilyusha, like a little boy's—plus the fact that Slava called him his friend. Sonya imagined Tatarenko as a small boy himself, something like Slava. Commissar Yermakov. He, evidently, was a very good-natured man as well as being very important and, of course, middle-aged, quite old, even. He soon passed out of Sonya's imagination. Ostrosablin. That was a wonderful name. What sort of man could he be with a name like that?

Khametov, Ryabushkin. . . . No, however hard she tried, her imagination produced nothing. Lunin. Now, he was a man she could see quite clearly in her mind's eye. He might have been standing in front of her.

Slava had told her about Lunin before he left and Lunin's name cropped up more than others in his letters. Sonya saw him as tall, stern and very brave. Young? She was so young herself that she considered people of twenty-five no longer young. That was about the age she imagined him to be. In looks, of course, he would be rather drawn, with sharp features, an aquiline curve to his nose and thin lips. He was very kind, too—he had done so much for Slava. All the same, Sonya would feel timid in his presence if she happened to meet him.

Would she ever see him, make his acquaintance? She had to admit to herself that she often thought about that. Then she would have a friend at the front like all the girls in the team. Sometimes she persuaded herself that it was even her duty to get to know him in order to thank him for all he had done for Slava. If she should ever happen to meet him she would go up to him and thank him in her own and in her father's name. That would be more impressive and correct, she thought. She clearly pictured the scene: she speaking and the tall man before her listening, looking down at her with grave, serious face.

She would finish, bow her head and leave the room. She would not force her company on him—what could he see in her? But he talked to Slava and Slava was full five years younger than she. Oh well, he talked to Slava as to a child, not seriously; he would listen to Slava's prattle and smile. Whereas she—she was no child.

Perhaps it would be better if they did not meet, if she simply wrote him a letter. Then he would not see her, would not find out what she really looked like. That would be easier. He would reply and she would write again and so the exchange would be launched. Several times she was on the point of taking pen and paper and starting a letter.

But the phrases which had formed in her mind for some reason turned out to be too stiff and cold. So she did not write.

However, she did not stop thinking of Lunin. Oh, the things she thought up. He might be lightly wounded, for example, and brought back into Leningrad. Slava would be with him, of course, and he would say: "Why should you go to hospital? We have a big flat, just right for you. My sister will look after you." Oh, what silly dreams. But at least no one would ever know about them.

3

On August 25, an Information Bureau bulletin mentioned Stalingrad for the first time. From then on the name of that city figured in every bulletin for many months. In their advance through South Russia the Germans had reached the Volga, and there, between the Volga and the Don, the greatest battle in human history had begun.

But in the north—round the Gulf of Finland, on Lake Ladoga, at Volkhov—the weird configuration of fronts that had taken shape nearly a year ago had scarcely changed. Leningrad was still blockaded, and there was still a gap in the blockade—the route across Lake Ladoga.

And yet, invisible changes in the balance of forces were taking place all the time. The very immobility of the fronts, prolonged as it had been, pointed to a weakening in German strength. The existence of the road across the lake had turned the siege of Leningrad into an absurdity, an absurdity that the Germans had been unable to alter for a very long time. It was evident that the enemy could not contemplate a simultaneous offensive on all fronts, like the summer offensive of 1941, and that by concentrating all their strength on the southern offensive, they had forfeited the possibility of carrying out even small-scale operations in the north. The position of the northern fronts remained

the same, but the basic situation gradually changed: the Germans went over to the defensive and the pressure of the Soviet troops steadily increased. The besieged gradually turned into besiegers, and the besiegers, into besieged.

This process developed slowly, under the surface, breaking out suddenly, in short clashes and minor battles.

Several of these minor battles, which took place only through the initiative of the Soviet command, were fought in the summer of 1942, when Lunin and his squadron were at an airfield in the rear. On July 20, for instance, there was the so-called Staro-Panovskaya operation, south-west of Leningrad. Its aim was quite insignificant—to push the Germans back a few hundred yards in one sector in order to stop them shelling certain Soviet front-line communications. The aim was fully achieved, and unable to resist the rapid Soviet assault, the Germans retired to a new line, leaving the Soviet troops in possession of powerful defence works which they had been fortifying for several months. To repair the situation, they staged a number of counter-attacks, but did not win back a yard of territory.

Three days later, on July 23, Soviet troops south-east of Leningrad carried out an assault on the German-held village of Putrolovo, a road junction at the bridge over the River Izhora. This advance, rather bigger than the Staro-Panovskaya operation, was also successful, in spite of desperate resistance on the part of the Germans. The village of Putrolovo was completely liberated.

After a short lull, on August 2, Soviet troops went into battle for the village of Yam-Izhora, situated at the point where the River Izhora cuts the Leningrad-Moscow road. This fierce daylight operation lasting five hours was also entirely successful—Yam-Izhora was liberated.

The significance of these battles against the background of such an enormous war was infinitesimal in itself, but their results showed that the iron ring gripping Leningrad was not so hard and incapable of expansion.

And in September, Soviet troops engaged the Germans

in fresh battles, this time on the southern shores of Lake Ladoga.

The German high command dreamed of withdrawing their best fighting units from the inactive northern fronts and sending them to Stalingrad. But this proved impossible, because the inactive fronts turned out to be far from inactive. The September battle on the southern shores of Lake Ladoga, into which the Germans were drawn against their will, not only prevented the German high command from transferring some of its troops to Stalingrad, but on the contrary, made it necessary to send fresh and quite considerable reinforcements up to Ladoga.

The ten Hurricanes took off from the rear air station early one misty morning and in V-formation flew over the forest, low, almost hedge-hopping.

The grey autumn mist hung in wreaths over the ocean of forest, it entangled itself in the boughs of the trees, it swelled up whenever there was a rise in the ground, and the aircraft would plunge into its gigantic waves only to emerge again. Lunin, who was leading the formation, looked round with apprehension—were they all there, had nobody strayed in the mist, lost his bearings and broken formation? But the formation always came out of the mist as complete and perfect as when it had entered it. Lunin could feel satisfied—his pilots flew beautifully and kept excellent formation. Never in his life had he experienced such a sense of power. Ten aircraft, each one repeating every movement he made, ready to obey his command. Lunin led his squadron over the ragged ocean of northern forest, flying to the front and rejoicing in the awareness of his strength.

He brought the aircraft straight to the bare hill and they passed low over Rassokhin's grave. How familiar was that airfield, the crest of every pine-tree around it, every cottage in the straggling village street! The aircraft circled

over the field and then each landed in turn. Proskuryakov, huge and smiling, was there to meet them. Lunin reported to him and presented his new pilots. Proskuryakov greeted them warmly.

Everything at the air station looked like home to Lunin. Everybody looked so friendly—Tararaksin, the regiment's eternal duty operations officer, Sergeant Zina, even Dr. Gromeko. He enjoyed a good dinner in the pilots' mess and in the evening went with pleasure to his quarters in the cottage with the forked birch-tree in front of it. The deaf old landlady greeted him like one of the family, dived into the cellar for pickled cucumbers and cabbage and made up his bed behind the bright curtain.

Next morning Proskuryakov accompanied the other two squadrons to the rear where they were to take in new aircraft and pilots. He was greatly concerned to know whether he was going to be given Soviet-built aircraft for One and Three Squadrons, or Hurricanes, as Two Squadron had received. Incidentally, by now he had almost lost hope of getting new Soviet aircraft. Before leaving he allocated to Two Squadron the sector which the regiment had to defend. Two Squadron was back in action again.

The September fighting south of Lake Ladoga was known as Operation Sinyavino, after the village of that name, a place that changed hands several times. The village itself was not important, but the heights on which it was located were.

Long ago, the Baltic Sea was considerably larger than it is now and then Lake Ladoga was a part of it. This ancient sea washed steep cliffs, quite unlike the flat low shores of the present Baltic coastline. The Sinyavino Heights were the remains of those ancient cliffs. The waters receded many thousands of years ago and the original coastline remains in the form of a very long, though not especially high ledge covered with forest, like a step of an enormous flight of stairs.

The whole of the Sinyavino ridge was in German hands.

The Red Army lines were below, under the ridge, on the flat bed of the valley. The Germans attached great value to this advantage of theirs, considering it a vital part of their positions on the approaches to Leningrad; when the Red Army started attacking the Sinyavino Heights they exerted every effort to hold them.

The Sinyavino operations were fought on both sides with exceptional violence. In their attempt to hold their positions at all costs the Germans kept throwing in reinforcements to match the mounting pressure of the Red Army. It was this task that the Soviet armies on the Northern front had been given during the battle of Stalingrad—to draw on themselves the maximum number of German units possible. This task was being fulfilled successfully.

Soviet bombers and Stormoviks inflicted blow after blow on the German fortified positions in the Sinyavino district. And the fighters were given the task of providing cover.

Lunin's squadron became an "umbrella," as the fighter groups providing cover to other aircraft were called.

On the first day of the fighting the division commander rang up Lunin and said:

"Send up six aircraft. You are to provide an umbrella for Bakanov's fellows. You will meet them at 15.00 hours in square twenty-eight, over the cape."

Major Bakanov was in command of the Stormoviks.

The prospect of protecting Stormoviks being flown across Lake Ladoga to attack the Sinyavino Heights was an interesting one. At long last Lunin would see Stormoviks at work.

In the early days of the war there was much talk on all air stations of those remarkable Soviet aircraft—the Stormoviks. At that time no other country in the world had aircraft equipped specially for storming. They were a product of Soviet aviation, designed by Ilyushin. Of course, they were no novelty by the autumn of 1942, but at the beginning of the war there had not been many of them and

it was only at this stage that they started appearing on the Baltic in substantial numbers. So it happened that this was to be Lunin's first mission with Stormoviks.

Three pairs prepared to take off—Lunin and Tatarenko, Kuznetsov and Ostrosablin, Karyakin and Ryabushkin. As he walked to the aircraft beside Tatarenko, Lunin said to him quietly:

"Stick to me. You've got to be where I am. It's your job to follow me."

Then, seeing what he took to be a shadow of dissatisfaction flit across Tatarenko's face, he added with an involuntary frown:

"The rest is not for you to worry about."

The six aircraft ran in turn across the wet grass of the airfield—it had been raining not long before and another shower was probably on the way. Lunin was the first in the air. He flew straight over Rassokhin's grave. Usually the lake was visible from there but the weather was exceptionally hazy that day with clouds floating just over the tree-tops and visibility limited to about two thousand yards. The sky was dull; the forest, in contrast, was brilliant with colour—the autumn leaves glowed crimson and yellow. The aircraft formed up and flew off.

Now Lunin could see that familiar coastline—the dark water with the white horses on its surface. As they approached the lake its vast expanse opened up gradually before them; but the horizon was not visible—it was lost behind the fringe of cloud that clung to the very water. They turned to starboard over the coastline. Low over the cape, exactly as arranged, they saw six aircraft. The Stormoviks, or "humpbacks" as the pilots called them.

Meeting near the cape, the fighters and Stormoviks set course south-westward and flew over the water—the Stormoviks slightly ahead and quite low, the fighters a little behind them and higher, just under the ceiling of cloud. From time to time Lunin glanced back to see whether Tatarenko was following him. And each time he had the

pleasure of seeing Tatarenko flying close behind, repeating each turn he made and not falling back once.

Had visibility been better they would long ago have spotted the shore they were making for and the wooded Sinyavino ridge behind it. They were only two or three minutes' flying time from their objective when four Messerschmitts burst suddenly out of the cloud and dived straight at the Stormoviks, skimming the surface of the lake.

These Messerschmitts had to be engaged and fought without an instant's delay. But if all six Soviet fighters got involved with them the Stormoviks would be left without protection and would be shot down over their target. Lunin called up Kuznetsov and Karyakin, instructing them and their seconds not to seek battle but to continue on their way, while he and Tatarenko went straight for the Messerschmitts and tackled them before they managed to reach the Stormoviks.

Would the two of them succeed in tying up the four enemy fighters so that not one of them could go for the Stormoviks? If Lunin's partner had been experienced he would have felt certain of success. But Tatarenko was in action for the first time. Would he realize that they could succeed only if he stuck to his commander's tail, in a position where he could both defend and be defended?

Sighting Lunin and Tatarenko the German aircraft turned and headed for them. With so clear a numerical advantage they were eager for a scrap.

Lunin and Tatarenko went on the defensive at once. To protect themselves from the Messerschmitts they chased each other in a circle, Tatarenko protecting Lunin's tail and Lunin, Tatarenko's. The Germans attacked the circle from outside, trying to catch the moment when the tail of one of the Soviet aircraft was exposed. But Lunin kept on going over to the attack himself and this forced the Messerschmitts to defend each other's tails, too, and to form their own circle—a much larger circle than the one Soviet

aircraft were tracing. So there were two circles, one inside the other, the four Messerschmitts outside, the two Hurricanes inside. The aircraft on the outer circle moved in one direction, those of the inner circle, in the opposite one.

Lunin had intentionally drawn the Germans into this whirligig although he well remembered how Rassokhin had warned him of the futility and danger of such a pattern. He had no doubt, however, that Rassokhin would have approved of it this time, given the task he was faced with. Now, at all costs, he had to hold the Messerschmitts until the Stormoviks had fulfilled their mission and returned. And there was no better way of holding them than this senseless roundabout—one circle inside the other. Provided, of course, neither he nor Tatarenko made a slip and—the main thing—did not allow themselves to be tempted. Moreover, they were circling right up against the cloud ceiling so that the moment the operation ceased to be necessary they could plunge into the cloud and disappear.

Round and round the aircraft flew. One turn, another, then another. The Germans were growing tired of the roundabout, so they started swerving in an effort to break the inner circle. But provided Tatarenko did not relax and swallow the baits, that was not going to work either. It was all a matter of stamina. You needed to have stamina to resist the temptation of shooting down an enemy aircraft.

Oh, they were cunning, those Germans, they were trying to hook him.

One of the Messerschmitts broke away from the circle, climbed a little and, plunging into the cloud, dived on Lunin from above. He missed, zoomed between Tatarenko and Lunin and plunged towards the lake.

As the Messerschmitt fell, it exposed its tail temptingly to Tatarenko.

Tatarenko could not resist and went after it.

The inner circle was broken. Lunin and Tatarenko had been separated.

The Germans grasped their opportunity in a flash. A second Messerschmitt abandoned its circling and dived after Tatarenko. Lunin fought with the other two close to the clouds while Tatarenko was fighting down below, near the water.

Lunin had no anxiety about himself. He had enough skill and experience in aerial combat not to let himself be shot down. Constantly going over to the attack he forced both his opponents to keep at a safe distance. Should they get too near he always had the possibility of slipping away from them into the clouds. No, it was not for himself that Lunin was anxious, it was for Tatarenko.

Tatarenko would not get the better of two Messerschmitts. His situation, moreover, was far more difficult than Lunin's. He had the water next to him down there, and water is not cloud, water is a dangerous neighbour. Near the water as near the earth every manoeuvre spelled risk. Make the slightest miscalculation in a turn, a few yards out, and you've had it.

Then Lunin noticed that Tatarenko had dived still lower and was now flying in a curve on the very surface, almost touching the crests of the waves.

Why had he done that? By chance, through ignorance or on purpose?

If it was intentional it was splendid.

The two Messerschmitts circled above Tatarenko, afraid to come any lower. Only a highly skilful and self-assured pilot was capable of risking a trick like that. It meant the pilot was invulnerable because the others did not dare to come close to the water. It meant he had more confidence in himself than his opponents. That was what he was counting on. Of course, Tatarenko had done something unpardonable in abandoning Lunin, but all the same the fellow had guts. Brains too.

Suddenly one of the Messerschmitts dived on Tatarenko.

It was sheer suicide.

Trying to flatten out, the Messerschmitt hit the water with the tip of one wing and broke in two.

It happened in sight of all and threw the Germans off their stride. Lunin grasped the opportunity in a flash and promptly shot down one of the Messerschmitts attacking him.

That was enough for the two remaining Messerschmitts. They made off, disappearing into the clouds.

Tatarenko climbed up to Lunin and took his place at his tail.

The aircraft which had accompanied the Stormoviks up to Sinyavino returned earlier than Lunin and his second and were already back at the station. So this time, too, Lunin was not to see the "humpbacks" at work.

Lunin and Tatarenko touched down and climbed out of their cabins almost at the same time. Lunin saw Tatarenko's face—it was glowing with happiness.

This expression of self-satisfaction and happiness made Lunin's gorge rise. So the fellow was pleased with himself! But of course! He had been in battle; thanks to his cleverness the Messerschmitt that had dived on him was in the drink. And now he thought he was a hero! That meant he did not understand a thing. Very well, he, Lunin, would help him to understand....

"Guards Sergeant Tatarenko!"

Tatarenko stood near his Hurricane surrounded by pilots and mechanics. He was waving his big hands in the air, depicting the aircraft. He was describing the battle in which he had just taken part, telling everybody how the Messerschmitt had got into a side-slip and plunged into the lake. His curly-haired head rose above all the others, his eyes shone, and he was the object of admiring looks from all sides. Hearing Lunin's call he raised his brows in surprise—Lunin usually addressed him simply as Tatarenko, without his rank. He promptly ran up to his commanding officer. Everybody looked their way, waiting to hear what Lunin had to say. Tatarenko stood at attention

before Lunin but a faint smile played on his lips and it was clear he expected to hear nothing but praise.

It was the smile that made Lunin finally explode.

"Guards Sergeant Tatarenko," he said, not recognizing his own voice. "You acted shamefully."

Tatarenko flinched.

"You deserted me in battle today," Lunin went on. "There is no more shameful act a pilot can commit."

"Comrade Major," exclaimed Tatarenko, his face a deep red. "I . . . I did not desert you. . . ."

"If you repeat what you've done today you will be grounded," said Lunin, not listening to him.

"It just happened. . . . I went for the Messerschmitt."

"That is all," said Lunin. "Dismiss."

Tatarenko turned and walked away, his head lowered, his angular shoulders drooping. Everyone watched him in silence. He could not look round, he could not meet anybody's eyes. Lunin felt a sharp pang of pity for him.

He was no longer quite sure that he had acted rightly. He recalled his own behaviour in his first battle. Why, he had behaved far worse than Tatarenko, yet Rassokhin had not said a word to him. . . . Rassokhin, of course, had seen that Lunin himself recognized his mistakes—that was just the reason why he had said nothing to him—whereas Tatarenko had not understood and was completely satisfied with himself, which meant he had had to be told. But, perhaps, he should not have spoken so sharply, he should not have lost his temper. No, he should have spoken even more sharply, but not in front of the others. That was the worst thing, Tatarenko was proud, and what had hurt him most was all those others hearing. And yet, who knows? Anyway, it was too late to mend. . . . A hard job, being in charge of human beings, much harder than being in charge of an aircraft.

From that day, from the time of that first battle the squadron was constantly engaged in fighting. Tatarenko remained Lunin's partner and they were always together—

in the sky and on the earth. Looking back, that first skirmish began to seem a small affair, altogether insignificant, something they never spoke about. But whenever he looked Tatarenko in the eyes Lunin felt sure that the man remembered everything. And in Lunin's eyes Tatarenko read that his commander, too, had forgotten nothing.

4

They went on making sorties with Stormoviks and bombers in the Sinyavino area and every time they met Messerschmitts. Sometimes the encounters took place over the forest—either over the Red Army's positions or behind the front, over German-held territory—but, more often, they fought over the lake, as the Messerschmitts constantly tried to engage the Soviet aircraft as far away from their targets as possible. Sometimes two or three pairs were involved and other times the squadron as a whole.

As the ground fighting for the Sinyavino Heights grew in intensity the number of Messerschmitts in the air steadily increased. But the number of Soviet aircraft grew, too. During the summer several new air strips had been cleared in remote forest glades and here new regiments and squadrons of aircraft were located. Never had either side involved so many aircraft in patrols over Lake Ladoga as in those days. Among the newly formed Soviet units there were, of course, fighters, and Lunin often met them in the air. There were times when the number of fighters involved in a battle ran into scores on each side. When one fighter returned to base for refuelling another replaced it in the battle immediately and the enormous tangle of aircraft, chasing each other and shooting each other up, circled over the lake from dawn to dusk.

It required only three or four days for the young pilots of Lunin's squadron to feel themselves old experienced fighters. And experienced they really were, for in that

short spell each of them had had to face death many times. Their faces, the expression of their eyes, changed and lost that youthful look they had worn so recently; they wore another, a sterner look. Many of them had several German aircraft to their credit—Tatarenko, for example, had five "kills." True, only one of the five was attributed to Tatarenko individually—the one that broke up after hitting the water in Tatarenko's first battle—the others were attributed to him and Lunin as a pair. Tatarenko never left Lunin's tail now, he clung to him throughout the battle and fought so closely alongside him that it was impossible to tell whether it was Lunin or Tatarenko who had shot down an enemy aircraft.

Those were exhausting, difficult days, terrible, yet full of rapture, for the pilots felt themselves stronger than the Germans. Despite all their efforts the Messerschmitts hardly ever succeeded in preventing the Soviet bombers and Stormoviks from getting through to their objectives. Every time the fighters engaged the Messerschmitts, beat off all their attacks, kept them tied up in fighting and did not release them until the Stormoviks or bombers had completed their missions and returned to base.

The Germans certainly suffered very heavy losses in this air fighting. Lunin's squadron, too, had its losses, and they were not light. What was more, there were some which, it seemed, might have been avoided.

It began with Kuznetsov losing his aircraft, and in rather strange circumstances. Kuznetsov and Ostrosablin were attacked by a Messerschmitt over the lake. There was no spirit or courage in the attack—a burst of fire from about three hundred yards, wha-am—and belt for home. Kuznetsov did not notice his aircraft had been hit but, glancing round, he suddenly realized that it was on fire. In a few moments the aircraft was wrapped in flames and when they reached the cabin Kuznetsov baled out.

All this happened under Ostrosablin's very eyes and it surprised him because he could not at all understand

the cause of the mishap. He, too, had the impression that if Kuznetsov's aircraft had been hit at all by the burst of enemy machine-gun fire, it had been nothing serious.

Kuznetsov was wearing a life-jacket which automatically became inflated on contact with the water. Once in the lake Kuznetsov's first action was to free himself from the parachute. He was at least ten miles from shore but he did not have any qualms because he could see Ostrosablin's aircraft overhead and knew he would be picked up. The water was cold—it was September—and his scorched hands smarted badly. However, it was not the cold or the burns that tortured him, it was the thought that he had lost his aircraft.

Ostrosablin contacted Lunin at the station by radio. With the help of Tararaksin, Lunin telephoned the Ladoga flotilla and a launch was at once sent out to search for Kuznetsov with Ostrosablin's help. When he was rescued he had been in the water for seventy minutes. He was taken to Kobona and put in a field hospital, for there were fears that he might have caught pneumonia. But Kuznetsov had not even caught a cold and next morning turned up on foot at the air station fit as could be, except for slight burns on his hands. However, it had been a long time since he looked so out of humour.

He had been losing that glum silence of his recently, especially since the squadron had started going into action. He no longer kept away from people, he made friends with his new comrades, and when Lunin went into the dug-out where the pilots used to wait their turn to fly he would often hear Kuznetsov's loud laugh. He enjoyed general respect as a pilot with some previous experience of fighting, and who from the beginning had met with considerable success—he had shot down two Messerschmitts, one independently, the other with Ostrosablin. All this helped to draw him out and to give him more self-respect. And suddenly everything had collapsed. He had returned without his aircraft.

For a pilot to return without his aircraft was a rare event in the regiment. It was more often the other way round, as had happened with Nikritin—the pilot had been killed but his aircraft went on flying. Worst of all, Kuznetsov could not even give a sensible explanation of why his aircraft had caught fire.

Yermakov was sceptical of the whole story. He had been away from the squadron and happened to arrive at the station in his U-2 on the day Kuznetsov returned.

"I suppose he hadn't had a drink or two before he went up," he asked Lunin when he was left alone with him.

Lunin frowned. He had not the least doubt that Kuznetsov was clean sober when he took off. What worried him was whether the man would keep sober now, after all that had happened to him. He had no aircraft, that meant no work. Everybody else was flying and he had to stay all day with the orderly in the cabin. Looking at Kuznetsov's gloomy dry face Lunin had serious doubts whether he would hold out and keep off the bottle.

But soon there were other mishaps that put the case of Kuznetsov into the shade. On the same day, in the same battle, Ostrosablin's and Dziga's planes caught fire and were lost.

This happened on a cold gusty but brilliantly clear September day when everything could be seen in the sharpest detail, when from the cockpit one could see for twenty miles around and at a height of hundreds of feet meet a yellow leaf snatched by whirlwinds from the forest and carried high into the air. On that day a part of the Sinyavino ledge was in Russian hands, but the Germans were throwing more and more men and launching counter-attack after counter-attack in an attempt to regain lost ground. From dawn to dusk armadas of Soviet bombers and Stormoviks flew over the lake towards the front and all day long their screen of fighters fought with the Messerschmitts which were trying to break through and attack them. All

that day huge whirling spheres of aircraft grappled over the lake from shore to shore.

The whole of Lunin's squadron took part in that battle. The fighting was hard and intense but things went well for the squadron as for the Soviet air force as a whole. The Germans had a slight superiority in numbers but everybody felt that this was more than offset by Soviet superiority in flying skill, dash and perseverance. The bombers and Stormoviks went on flying across the lake, fulfilling their missions and returning with insignificant losses.

Over the radio in his aircraft Lunin could hear the voices of all his pilots in battle.

"He's in the drink! He's in the drink!" he heard Karyakin exclaim joyfully, as the Messerschmitt he had been after crashed in the lake.

"That's the second in the drink," came Kostin's measured bass in reply. "Lazarovich and I put the first one in."

A few minutes later Karyakin, excited by the chase and enraptured by victory, again shouted:

"He's in the drink!"

And back came Kostin's bass:

"That makes three."

Suddenly Lunin noticed that one of the Hurricanes was on fire.

He could not see the flames—maybe because the sunshine was too strong—but a dense black trail of smoke dragged after the aircraft in a belt spreading across nearly the whole sky.

Whose aircraft was it?

The number on the fuselage told Lunin that it was Ostrosablin's. He was horrified.

The point was that Ostrosablin had only just returned from the station where he had been to refuel and reload his guns; he had, in fact, not yet resumed fighting. That meant his aircraft had caught fire far away, on the very edge of the fighting area.

Ostrosablin's aircraft went on flying although it was in

flames. The pilot held his course towards the coast, banking gradually in the direction of the station. Fearing that the aircraft would explode in the air, Lunin ordered Ostrosablin to bale out. But the damaged aircraft's radio was evidently out of action. Ostrosablin did not reply and did not bale out; he stayed at the controls of the blazing aircraft.

In the smoke behind the burning plane two Messerschmitts formed up ready to shoot the pilot in the air when he jumped. But Lunin spotted them, overtook them and, accompanied by Tatarenko, flew to Ostrosablin's defence.

Ostrosablin probably wanted to reach the station, but he could not manage it. He reached the coast, however, and baled out over the forest from a height of no more than one thousand five hundred feet. Lunin and Tatarenko saw the parachute catch in a fir-tree and Ostrosablin himself reach the ground and wave to them reassuringly.

They left him there and flew back over the lake to where the rest of the squadron was fighting. Before they reached their destination, however, they met another blazing aircraft.

This was Dziga's plane. They spotted it just at the moment Dziga jumped clear from it. That happened right over the Ladoga shipping route and the parachute was noticed from a tug that was towing two barges. Dziga was immediately fished out unharmed and an hour later landed at Kobona.

Ostrosablin and Dziga reached the air station simultaneously. Like Kuznetsov they were not in a position to provide a fully convincing explanation of the cause of their aircraft catching fire. Of course, the Germans had shot at them, but at a considerable distance, and so they could not have been hit by more than two or three spent bullets. Lunin recalled the many occasions when his I-16 had been hit by bullets, yet he had flown it the whole first year of the war without it ever catching fire.

Now there were three grounded pilots in the squadron

left to wander gloomily about the station and up and down the village street, while the rest were flying. But while Kuznetsov sulked in gloomy silence, Ostrosablin and Dziga were not capable of being left idle for long—their strong hands itched for work. Work, indeed, was found for them—chopping firewood for the kitchen. All the kitchen and mess staff went out into the yard to watch them gloomily swinging the long-helved axes, splitting a thick length of birch wood with a single blow. They worked off their vexation on the wood pile and the mountain of firewood grew and grew.

A day later the new personnel of the squadron suffered its first casualty. Vadim Lazarovich's plane was shot down in flames and he burned with it.

It happened near Sinyavino, over the front. Screened by Lunin, Tatarenko, Khametov and Lazarovich a flight of bombers was attacking German fortified strongholds on high ground. The Soviet planes were met by anti-aircraft fire but it was not strong enough to worry them much. Then two Messerschmitts turned up, circled and made an irresolute attempt to break through to the bombers. But the four Hurricanes beat them off and before the bombers had finished delivering their bombs they turned aside, firing occasional bursts. Suddenly Lazarovich's aircraft caught fire.

The flames soon spread and the aircraft, wrapped in black smoke, quickly lost height. Lunin never took his eyes off it; he was waiting impatiently for the moment when the tiny figure with a parachute attached to it would break away from the aircraft. But Lazarovich did not bale out. Why not, nobody ever knew; perhaps he was wounded or burned, perhaps he had lost consciousness from the smoke and heat, or had simply lost his head. The blazing aircraft crashed in the forest, a little behind the Soviet lines, and Lazarovich burned with it.

This was the first fatality among the new pilots. Everyone felt deeply the loss of Lazarovich, they had grown

very close to one another in that short time. Karyakin who, from the time the squadron went into action, had revived Kabankov's *Battle Sheet* brought out a number with a black border and a big article entitled "We Shall Avenge You, Vadim!" It was recalled that Lazarovich was married. They decided to write to his widow. They wrote the letter together in the evening after a day's flying, by the light of a kerosene lamp, and the words were solemn and touching. They referred to Vadim Lazarovich as a hero who had fallen bravely for his country; they said how fond they had been of him and swore to see the cause for which he has given his life through to the end, and to honour his memory; they offered the young widow their help and friendship.

In one week's operations only six remained of the ten new aircraft which the squadron had waited for so long. The fighting strength of the squadron had been practically halved. Lunin and Yermakov were in the depths of despondency, the more so because these considerable losses were not fully explicable.

"Whatever you may say, the pilots are to blame, too," Yermakov asserted. "Ostrosablin, Dziga and poor old Lazarovich. None of them first-rate pilots. There's something in the fact that neither your aircraft nor Tatarenko's has ever caught fire."

Lunin, however, was convinced that in this affair neither art nor experience could help a pilot. A few days later he was proved right.

5

All these things happened practically under Slava's eyes —he saw the pilots off on every operation and met them on their return, and, standing with them beside their aircraft, he was among the first to hear them describe what had happened to them in battle. When the aircraft were

in the air he spent his time with Kuznetsov, Dziga and Ostrosablin, listening to their complaints, comforting them as best as he could and sharing their sorrows.

And together with Lunin and all the other pilots Slava felt personally offended when the news reached the station that One and Three Squadrons, which had been withdrawn for re-equipment, had received new Soviet aircraft of the type they had heard about as long ago as the previous spring. It wasn't fair—Two Squadron, which because of its record and fame had been sent for re-equipment before any other, had been snubbed.

"Gosh, how I'd like to see them in the air," sighed Ivan Dziga.

"I wouldn't," retorted Ostrosablin hotly. "What's the use? They'll be flying and scrapping while we're loafing about the station."

Slava fully shared his indignation, and he, too, was irked by the situation in which the squadron had been placed.

But, besides the chagrin and the worries he shared with the whole squadron, Slava had his own personal troubles.

On returning from that tranquil summer in the Vologda Region Slava found a thick packet of letters from his father. Vsevolod Andreyevich had at last, after long delay, learned about everything that his family had been through in Leningrad. Now he knew how his wife had been killed and about the death of his father-in-law, too. Like everybody else in the country, he had heard the terrible news of the famine in Leningrad. He had only a rather vague idea of what was happening in his native city, but that vagueness made everything seem even worse than it really was. Two orphaned children, helpless and weak, abandoned among strangers and dying of hunger in the besieged city, children living under bomb and shell among ruined houses and corpses that lay in the streets. . . . He himself had been in constant action all this time, for his division had been fighting in the upper reaches of the Don; life had been

hard, he had been stretched to the limits of endurance, but he had never stopped thinking of his children. But what could he do? How could he help them? He could only write letters, and that he did.

From Sonya he learned—also after long delay—that Slava had left the city and was living at some air station with pilots. Sonya wrote that he was getting plenty to eat there, but that was little comfort to Vsevolod Andreyevich. An air station was part of the front and the front was certainly no place for a twelve-year-old boy. About that time Vsevolod Andreyevich got in touch with one of his relatives, a middle-aged married woman who had been evacuated from Kharkov to Siberia with the factory where her husband worked. She, too, had children and she agreed to take Slava. And although her agreement was accompanied by countless references to various domestic difficulties and by many reservations which cast some doubt on her sincerity, Vsevolod Andreyevich decided that it was to her that Slava should go, once he had got out of Leningrad.

From Sonya he discovered the APO number of the pilots who had adopted Slava, and started writing—first of all, naturally, to Slava himself and then to the regiment commissar, that is, to Yermakov. He was sincere and effusive in thanking the commissar for having saved his son from starvation and for having taken such good care of him: at the same time, he begged their aid in getting Slava sent to his aunt in Siberia.

From the beginning Yermakov had taken no less interest in Slava's fate than Lunin. He felt sorry for the little boy, he was fond of him, he had grown used to seeing him around and really quite spoiled him, adopting a lenient attitude to everything Slava did. So, when Vsevolod Andreyevich's letters arrived, he read them in a doubtful frame of mind, not knowing how to act.

He did not at all want to part with Slava, nor was he certain it was necessary. For instance, as far as Slava's

health was concerned, he was far better off in the regiment; there could not be two minds about that—it was enough to look at the lad's plump rosy cheeks and to recall what he had looked like when he was brought out of Leningrad. To tell the truth, Yermakov felt in his heart of hearts that Slava's presence at the station was good for the regiment, too, though, maybe, he could not quite explain why this should be so. Of course, the official list of the establishment personnel of air-force units did not allow for twelve-year-old boys, and Yermakov was always most respectful of lists and regulations, but he could not fail to notice how the faces of the pilots and ground staff softened and lit up when they saw Slava, or how they laughed and joked when they talked to him, and he could not help but think that all this was good for them. As he read Vsevolod Andreyevich's letters he felt a twinge of dislike for that aunt of Slava's who had gone to Siberia. What had she done to deserve that the regiment should turn over to her the lad they had saved from starvation, clothed and nourished, the lad who lived with them and whom they all loved like a little brother, a little chum?

On the other hand, however, a father was a father, that had to be granted. And after all, it was, perhaps, not the business of a military unit, participating for over a year in ceaseless and heavy fighting, to bring up a child. The most important thing, though, was that the place for a boy of Slava's age was in school—and there were no schools at the front.

This last argument was, in Yermakov's opinion, the most weighty of all those advanced in the letters. When Slava had been brought to the station he had been too weak for any studies—he needed feeding, not teaching. But now he was a strong lad, he ought to study. He had lost one year as it was, he could not be allowed to lose another. But how could he study? Only by going to stay with his aunt.

Slava knew of these plans from his father's letters to him, as well as from what Yermakov told him, and every time he heard any talk about his being sent to Siberia he blanched with hatred and fear. Going to stay with his aunt meant parting for ever with Lunin, with the pilots, with the regiment which had for so long been a home to him. When he realized that the threat of being sent away was acute he began to think of himself as someone in a position of extreme danger.

But he at once forgot his apprehension when news suddenly reached the station that Lunin had jumped from a blazing aircraft behind the enemy's lines and that Ilya Tatarenko was missing.

It happened on an operation when they were escorting Stormoviks blasting German batteries near Sinyavino. The Germans met the aircraft with violent flak. Lunin did not usually pay too much attention to flak—he knew his small elusive Hurricane made a difficult target. By manoeuvring he left the exploding shells either far behind or to one side.

Suddenly his aircraft gave a slight jolt. He had been hit—not by a shell, of course, but by a small splinter which must have lost much of its force. He glanced round to see where the splinter had hit and saw that his aircraft was on fire.

The flames had not succeeded in spreading and Lunin tried to put them out. He rolled the plane, then went into a dive, he made one sharp swift movement after another. But the aircraft was burning like tinder. The fuselage was blazing strongly and the flames were leaping towards the cabin, towards the petrol tank.

Each time he turned Lunin saw Tatarenko on his tail and, all around Tatarenko's aircraft, the white bursts of flak. The Germans were shooting at Tatarenko now. "Why is he following me? Why doesn't he make off?" Lunin

asked himself. "Is he going to let them set him on fire, too?"

Realizing that it was impossible to extinguish the flames Lunin headed eastwards in order to cross the line of the front. If bale out he must then let it not be over German lines.

The flames were licking the petrol tank. It was unbearably hot in the cockpit.

When Lunin felt his flying suit catch fire he baled out.

He was not high—no more than two thousand five hundred feet. He tugged the ring on his chest almost at once. The parachute opened and he hung dangling from the straps.

A whole world of sounds that had been drowned by the engine now struck his ears. He was hearing the roar of the front, a steady constant rumble like the sound of rollers. In it he could distinguish the boom of artillery and the crackle of machine-gun fire. The air winced from the violent blast. Swaying under the silken cupola of the parachute Lunin looked down eagerly, trying to make out on which side of the front line he was falling.

But the autumnal earth wore so motley a coat that he could distinguish nothing on it. Patches of shadow cast by the swift-borne ragged clouds moved across it in disorder and between the shadows the sun was reflected so dazzlingly in the ponds and marshes that it hurt the eyes to look at them. Fallen leaves of the most brilliant hues—orange, red, yellow—hid and confused everything, like the best camouflage. Marsh and groves of aspen, alder and birch, then more marsh. Whose were the guns, whose the blockhouses in those marshes—German or Soviet?

Lunin found it easier to look at the sky. The moment he lifted his eyes he saw, quite near by, a black streak of smoke across the sky.

An aircraft was burning.

For a moment he took it to be his own and was surprised. Surely it could not have remained in the air while

he had been floating down by parachute? No, that was impossible.

That meant it was another aircraft.

But whose? Tatarenko's?

Just then a gust of wind caught the parachute and it closed his view of that part of the sky where the aircraft was burning.

The lower Lunin floated the more strongly was he spun and hurled about by the wind. The clouds were moving from west to east. That meant the wind ought to carry Lunin eastwards, exactly the way he wanted to go. But he found that all the air was in layers and that at about 1,200 feet the wind was blowing in the opposite direction. Lunin was being tugged westwards. He heard the ping of bullets and realized he was under fire. He saw holes torn in the silk of the parachute. Lower down, though, the wind changed again. Strong and gusty it carried Lunin towards the east over the crests of the trees, together with leaves swept up from the earth, and so saved him from the rifle fire. On several occasions his dangling legs almost touched the trees. But an eddy would whisk him up and carry him farther.

At length he managed to grasp the bare trunk of an old aspen which had lost almost all its leaves. The parachute, puffed by the wind, tried to tear him from his hold and take him farther. Lunin was entangled with the parachute straps and he realized that he could free himself only with the aid of a knife. Holding on to the tree trunk with his left hand he groped for his knife and cut through the straps one by one.

He had freed himself from the parachute, now all that remained was to clamber down the tree. He was about fifteen feet from the ground.

All round he saw tree-tops, boughs and leaves; he could distinguish nothing more than ten paces away. Yet the whole air thundered. Shells were passing overhead with a hideous howling sound—where they came from

and where they were going to he did not know. He could hear short bursts of automatic rifles coming from all sides, but it was impossible to tell who was firing them and who they were being fired at.

Climbing down from bough to bough, clinging with his whole body to the rough wet trunk, he began to descend. Suddenly a stout branch cracked and broke under his foot. He lost his balance and let go the trunk. His heavy body crashed through the boughs and hit the ground.

He landed on his left leg, it twisted, something cracked in it, and Lunin tumbled on his back. The pain was so sharp that he lost consciousness.

He came to with cold drops of water sprinkling his face. It was raining slightly. Lunin was lying on the black peaty soil, which was wet and swampy, criss-crossed with gnarled roots and carpeted with leaves. Here everything was gloomy and still; all around rose tough crooked tree trunks; the air smelt of rotting stumps and toadstools. Outside the clump of trees, the thunder of battle rolled on incessantly but in here the leaves fell leisurely from the twigs and the rain drops pattered gently down. Lunin shifted slightly and heard himself moan with the intense pain. His left leg felt enormous, bigger than his whole body. Every time he tried to shift his position the stab of pain was unbearable.

He clenched his teeth to suppress the groaning. Whose shots were those—his own side's or the Germans'? The Germans must be over there, the Soviet lines that way. Or was it the other way round? What if these shots from quite near by came from the Germans? If only he could move. But perhaps the safest place for him to be was just where he was, in this grove. No, there was nothing safe about this place. They might come in at any moment. And it was too wet.

He was, in fact, lying in water, and his whole flying suit was soggy. It was the wetness of his clothes that finally made him move. Blinking with pain and gritting

his teeth he rolled over on his stomach and raised himself on his elbows. He found that with the help of his right knee he could crawl on his elbows. But crawl where to? Maybe to the left first, there where the firing was nearest of all. He had to know who it was. If he found Germans he would crawl the other way.

He could not lift his left leg at all. It dragged over the ground, brushing against all the roots. Every two or three yards he stopped and lay still for a long time until the unbearable pain in his damaged thigh eased a little. As he crawled he sweated profusely from pain, but after each pause he stubbornly resumed his slow progress.

Little by little he left the clump of old aspen-trees behind him and soon he found himself in a dense grove of alder from which most of the leaves had fallen. The sound of firing seemed to be nearer. He could not force his way through the undergrowth at a crawl, so he made a detour. But he found more undergrowth ahead of him and before setting out to crawl round it he decided to lie still and rest from his exhausting pain.

Suddenly a twig snapped and he heard footsteps quite close by. He silently drew his pistol from its holster, laid it before him and froze. There was somebody moving on the other side of the bushes. Two of them, judging from the sounds. They were coming nearer. And then, through the thick tangle of twigs he saw them. It was impossible to take a good look at them but he recognized them at once as Germans.

There was probably a path over there. Both the Germans moved cautiously, stooping low. They were wearing helmets. Though they spoke in whispers they passed so close to where Lunin lay that he could clearly hear them. The path evidently made a bend just there, for the voices grew fainter.

Oblivious of his pain Lunin kept his eyes fixed on the Germans. He had been fighting for over a year, he had

shot down dozens of German planes but he had never once heard the accents of the foreign tongue so near.

Another minute and the sound of the heavy footsteps ceased. Now Lunin knew that the way he was crawling led to the German lines. All that remained for him to do was to find out who was on the other side.

Mastering his pain he crawled back. Again he rounded the undergrowth, again he went through the aspen grove. It stopped raining and the sun peeped out, then it rained again; and on he crawled. At length he reached the place where he had fallen from the tree. He lay still there once more till his agony had ebbed a little. He was so worn out by the pain that he had lost all desire to move farther. But he rallied and crawled on.

However, he soon found that with every yard he covered the ground became looser and wetter. He crawled through pools of water standing among the grass and his elbows sank deep in mud. He dragged his body forward obstinately but at last, after his chin had dug into the mud several times, he realized that ahead of him lay a quagmire which he could never hope to get through at a crawl. Back he went and with great effort reached the place where he had started from.

That was the end. He could not crawl any farther. He had never imagined such pain could exist.... Everything grew blurred before his eyes.

He lost consciousness.

6

Suddenly he came to.

A rustle!

He turned his head in a flash and listened.

Someone seemed to be crawling—there, behind those tree trunks. Quite near. Lunin brought his pistol hand in

front of his face. He would shoot, at his enemy first, then at himself. He would not surrender alive.

That rustling sound again.

Then a whisper:

"Don't fire. It's me."

And just beyond the black barrel of his pistol Lunin saw Ilya Tatarenko's head raised just off the ground.

"I knew you were here," Tatarenko whispered. "I saw you fall in this clump."

His black eyes gleamed. He was delighted to have found Lunin.

Lunin was in such pain, he was so moved and delighted himself that he could not utter a word. Tatarenko went on whispering hurriedly:

"I was following you all the time. I caught fire a minute after you, before you'd even baled out. Didn't you see me? I could see you all the time. When you baled out I did, too."

"Straightaway?" asked Lunin. An incredible thought had crossed his mind.

"Well . . . er . . . yes . . . almost. After all, my aircraft was on fire."

"Couldn't you have hung on a bit longer?"

"How could I? It was like an oven in there as it was. . . . Well, maybe I could have hung on a few more seconds. Ten, say. But I'd have had to bale out then, anyway."

"But you could have hung on till you'd reached our lines, couldn't you?"

"I suppose so. But I didn't want to be separated from you. Looked to me you were being carried straight into the Germans' hands."

He broke off, not certain whether Lunin approved of his action or not. Lunin looked at him, astounded; he had understood everything. Tatarenko could have baled out later, over his own lines. But he had seen how Lunin was falling behind the German lines and he had baled out so as not to leave him there alone.

"Those eddies.... I got carried one way and you the other," Tatarenko went on. "I fell near our lines."

"Where are they?"

"Somewhere over there," Tatarenko waved a hand in the direction of the quagmire through which Lunin had tried unsuccessfully to crawl. "And there's a German blockhouse over that way. I've just seen it. About a hundred yards from here. They've dug themselves in there, put up a lot of wire and they're sitting in their burrows like susliks.... It's all marsh round here, with the Germans on one side and our fellows on the other. Lucky you fell in these trees, the undergrowth is thick. A man can pass two paces away and not see you.... D'you know, I've already been in this thicket once before. Where were you? Did you leave it?"

Lunin nodded.

"Good thing I came back."

Tatarenko suddenly broke off, gave Lunin an odd look and asked:

"Are you wounded, Comrade Guards Major?"

"No," Lunin replied. "I mean—I've hurt myself."

"Your leg?"

"Yes."

"Broken it?"

"I don't know. I can't walk on it."

"Ah, and here am I chattering away," Tatarenko whispered. "Why didn't I ask at once. Can't you crawl? God, it must be giving you hell!"

His dark, boyishly expressive face winced as he imagined how much Lunin must be suffering. He crawled over to him, lay down beside him, took Lunin's arm and hooked it round his own neck.

"Hold on to me," he said.

Lunin at once felt himself lying on Tatarenko's broad, strong, muscular back. Tatarenko crawled, carrying Lunin along with him, carefully and lightly.

He tried to prevent Lunin's injured leg from dragging

on the ground or brushing against bushes. He crawled through the swamp, and under Lunin's weight his whole body sank into the liquid mud. There was still shooting going on around the marshes, and the shells went on whining over their heads, and various suspicious cracklings and rustlings quite near by made them stop for a long time. There was intermittent rain, the sun would come out for a few moments, then slip behind the clouds again. It was sinking now and the beams came slantwise through the bushes. Tatarenko moved by guesswork but he made up his mind quickly and confidently. He was greatly excited by all that had happened and Lunin heard him whispering hotly and quickly nearly all the time.

"D'you know, I found your parachute before I found you," he said. "Lying in a pool. About two hundred yards from where you were. Got carried a long way."

He was shocked by the unfamiliar dampness of the northern forest.

"People live up to their ears in water here. You should see our steppes in September. Dry and warm. You can lie down anywhere on the grass and sleep."

Then he suddenly remembered he had lost his aircraft.

"And I've not been flying a fortnight yet. When will they give me another? A long time, maybe. What then? All day long from the cabin to the mess, and back again. D'you think they'll really keep us waiting long? Maybe the whole winter."

He kept asking Lunin how he felt and whether he was comfortable:

"Put your weight on me, Comrade Guards Major, don't worry about me. Hurts a lot? Or is it easier now?"

"It's a little easier," said Lunin.

In fact he did not feel a scrap more comfortable. The pain did not let up at all. It was sapping all his strength.

A Red Army man shot up in their path and waved a hand grenade. When he recognized them as his own, he said:

"You're crawling straight into a mine field."

He told them where it was safe to walk and led them along a narrow wet path through a clump of old leafless birch-trees, nearly every one of which had its crown torn off by shell fire. Tatarenko carried Lunin like a child in his arms.

"Put me down," Lunin begged him several times.

"Aren't you comfortable, Comrade Guards Major?" Tatarenko would ask.

"I'm all right but you must be tired. It's not right. You ought to rest."

"I'm not tired. Not a bit," Tatarenko would say. "Just you hold on to me tighter."

And went on walking.

At last they reached a long communication trench, and walked knee-deep in murky water. They kept passing soldiers with tommy-guns clutched to their bellies; many of them dozed as they stood, leaning against the trench wall, their feet in the water. Then Tatarenko and Lunin reached a dug-out where they were welcomed by a very young lieutenant; wrapped in a canvas cape he sat cross-legged on a bunk, like a bird on a perch—the floor of the dug-out was under water.

"Ours is a wet life," he complained to Tatarenko. "It'll be a bit drier once the winter comes but meanwhile we sleep in water, we eat in water, we. . . ."

Tatarenko examined the unfamiliar mode of life of the infantry with curious interest.

"Have you been sitting in this bog for long?" he enquired.

"Over a year when you come to reckon it up," said the lieutenant reflectively. "The units on our right flank—over there near Sinyavino—they've been seeing some action," he added, enviously, "but it's quiet here. Lie low for a little, then do a bit of shooting. Suppose you haven't heard when we're going over to the offensive—to free Leningrad?"

He was seeing airmen close to for the first time and apparently thought they must be much better informed about everything than he was. He was delighted to see them and enquired about Lunin's leg with commiseration. He explained that there was a medical battalion in their unit, a doctor, too, and even offered to take them along there himself. But Lunin, who was quite helpless with pain and who had remained silent up to that point, suddenly raised objections. He was horrified at the idea of getting stuck in the medical battalion of another unit, far away from his own men, and he did everything he could to see that he got home, to his own regiment.

"Don't leave me here," he whispered to Tatarenko. "I can stand everything.... But don't leave me here."

Tatarenko hesitated at first; he did not know how he ought to act, but, noticing the look of undisguised alarm in Lunin's eyes, he resisted every attempt to put Lunin in the hands of the local M.O. He begged for a car to take his wounded C.O. to the air station. The lieutenant applied himself zealously to the telephone and some twenty minutes later told them that the regiment chief of staff had placed a car at the disposal of the wounded airman.

It was no easy matter to place Lunin in the car, for with his damaged leg he could not sit. All the way to the station Tatarenko held Lunin's heavy body in his arms to save him as much as possible from bumps and jolts.

The sun had long set and the autumn night was spreading deep moist shadows over the earth. From time to time the darkness was rent by the flashes of shell-bursts on the background of which appeared, only to vanish, a fantastic pattern of leafless birch boughs. They drove for many hours in the darkness along a forest road, splashing noisily through puddles, bumping over roots and ruts, while in front of them ran a tiny spot of blue light that fell from the heavily masked headlamps.

Trying not to groan Lunin reflected that this was just how he had brought Serov back. And now it was his turn.

Serov in the arm and he in the leg. Surely he would not have to go off somewhere far away, like Serov, and part with the squadron for ever, and not be with the regiment to see what the future held. These thoughts filled him with alarm and worried him more than the pain. A good thing that Tatarenko had not let him down, and that he would be going to their own doctor, not to one he didn't know. Another doctor might have sent him back to base hospital immediately, but he could talk Gromeko round.

Despite the pain he managed to doze off somehow. He awoke to the sound of voices and bright lights. He was being carried into the sick-bay. Yermakov, Hilda, Slava, Khametov, Kostin, Deyev, Dziga—who was not there? How pale they all looked.... Or was that only from the lamp light? Little lights danced in the pupils of their anxious eyes.

No one had slept at the station that night. They had all been waiting. Tararaksin had received by telephone a message that Tatarenko, who had first been reported missing, had turned up and was bringing Lunin back; and he had passed on the news to all.

"Please go away, all of you," said Dr. Gromeko, hurriedly slipping on his smock. "How many times do I have to tell you. Bring him over here, to the table. Careful now."

"You're not going to send me away, doctor, like you did Serov, are you?" Lunin asked. "Don't do that. You can do anything you like with me, but do let me stay here."

"Send you away? You? Where to?" the doctor asked in a loud voice, deftly freeing Lunin of his soaked and mud-stained flying suit. "Why should we send you away? We'll soon have a little trouble like this put right. Your bones are all whole. A simple dislocation. No fracture, just a dislocation. One moment, please. I'll put it back in joint and in three days you'll be jumping about."

The doctor grasped the injured leg with his hands.

"Done it?" asked Tatarenko who was still supporting Lunin's shoulders.

The doctor looked at him. Tatarenko's lips were trembling.

"Sergeant Tatarenko, you're as panicky as an old woman. Be off with you, I don't need you," he ordered. "Masha!" he called to the nurse. "Come here. Stand here and hold the Guards Major by the shoulders. That's the way."

He pulled on Lunin's leg and Lunin lost consciousness from the pain.

7

Towards the end of September the fighting around Sinyavino died down.

It had led to no significant change in the disposition of the front around Leningrad and Lake Ladoga. But it had done what it was intended to do. The Germans now knew that they could not transfer as much as a single division, a regiment, or a battalion, from there to the Stalingrad front.

"What's happened to the Germans reminds me of that idiot who shouted that he'd caught a bear," said Uvarov when he visited Lunin at the sick-bay. "People shouted back: 'Bring him over here.' 'I can't,' the fellow shouted. 'The bear won't let me.' "

Lunin had never seen Uvarov so animated and happy before. He seemed to be keeping some good news up his sleeve, but he did not want to reveal it. Lunin asked him how things were going round Stalingrad. Those days everybody asked Uvarov about Stalingrad. The gigantic battle on the Volga continued, stirring every heart, but the official communiqués about it were reserved and terse.

"I know just as little about it as you do," replied Uvarov. "And I think about it just the way you do, too."

"What do you mean?" asked Lunin in surprise. "What do you think about it?"

"I think the bow-string has been drawn to the limit," said Uvarov slowly, gravely.

"And that it will soon be released?"

"Just so."

"Yes, that's the way I think," said Lunin.

As he left the ward Uvarov said:

"Get better quickly, Guards Major. There's a surprise waiting for you."

Once Dr. Gromeko had got his dislocated thigh back in joint, Lunin recovered rather fast. His left leg was swollen and grew as stiff as a log but the doctor treated it assiduously with poultices and hot baths and the swelling gradually subsided. He was the only patient and had the ward to himself. However, he could not complain of loneliness. There was always somebody sitting beside his bed.

The pilots from his squadron began their visits early in the morning. Two or three of them would come at a time and sit down on a wooden bench dragged out of the waiting-room. It would have ended with the whole squadron gathering there had the doctor not started turning the visitors out when they became too numerous. Then the pilots arranged to come and sit in turn beside Lunin's bed. Looking at their pleasant, open, boyish faces Lunin marvelled at their affection for him.

He had grown attached to them, too, though he had known them only a couple of months. He felt lonely when several hours passed without his seeing them. As soon as he awakened he was on the look-out for them and was delighted when he heard the knock on the door and the doctor's stern voice saying: "Wipe your feet, Ryabushkin. Bringing mud into the ward again."

At night sometimes, when he thought about them, he even felt glad that he had no family of his own. Would he be so keenly fond of them if he were a family man?

Tatarenko, of course, was his most frequent visitor. Frank, sociable, enthusiastic, he ran over to the sick-bay twenty times a day and shared every scrap of news with Lunin.

And there was news in plenty. For example, right after the battle of Sinyavino all the young pilots were promoted to the rank of junior lieutenant. There was something very boyish in their delight at this event. They all came to see Lunin dressed up to the nines in their new tunics with the new rings on the sleeves and did not hide their satisfaction at the shine of their brass buttons.

But their pleasure was spoiled by the knowledge that the squadron was so short of aircraft, a fact which neither a new rank nor a new tunic could alter. True, they still had four Hurricanes left, but nobody had any faith in them now, and when the Sinyavino fighting was over, headquarters grounded them.

What made things worse was that Two Squadron could not count on getting new aircraft in the near future. After all, it was not long since they had received the Hurricanes. And then something happened which rubbed the distressing nature of their situation in very hard. On October 1 the other two squadrons flew from the rear in new Soviet aircraft.

From his bed Lunin heard the powerful hum of their engines all day. Major Proskuryakov came over to see Lunin, filling the whole ward with his bulk and glowing with pride and joy: at no time had the regiment he commanded possessed such magnificently powerful aircraft.

Smarting with a sense of their own poverty the pilots of Two Squadron gazed with envy at those new aircraft which belonged to others; they heaved sighs of envy and hurried to share their impressions with Lunin. Their enthusiasm knew no bounds. What smashing jobs those new aircraft were, how easily they took off, how steeply they could climb, and how easy they were to land! As for their speed.... They flew faster than any I-16, Hurricane or Messerschmitt.

Everybody was waiting impatiently to know how Messerschmitts would behave against the new Soviet aircraft. And the Messerschmitts turned out to be extremely shy of

meeting them. Whenever the pilots of One and Three Squadrons appeared over Lake Ladoga, the Messerschmitts simply disappeared or dithered about somewhere on the edge of the sky just above the horizon.

"We'll have to reorganize our whole fighting tactics with Messerschmitts," reasoned Kostin, his full lips protruding.

"Reorganize!" Tatarenko snorted. "It's not a question of reorganizing tactics. What we need to do with Messerschmitts is to chase them."

This exchange took place at Lunin's bedside. Suddenly the glint of a plane flashed across the patch of sky that could be seen through the small window of the ward—flashed and vanished.

"Did you see it, Comrade Commander?" exclaimed Tatarenko. "Isn't it a beauty? There's strength and line for you! Notice that slim fuselage and that ever so slight curve of the wings? Makes me want to turn a somersault when I see it."

Yes, the Hurricanes had brought misfortune. Now everyone realized that, and nobody tried any longer to defend them. Yermakov, of course, had also abandoned the attempt. On the contrary, much put out because he had trusted them too easily in the first place, he now attacked them with particular bitterness.

"What do you think, Konstantin Ignatyevich," he would ask Lunin indignantly. "Do the British fly in bad planes themselves?"

Lunin could not answer that question. How should he know?

"I shouldn't think they're flying in very good ones," he said. "Look how arrogantly the Germans bomb their cities. Over here, the Germans never felt so free, even in the first weeks of the war."

The swelling on Lunin's leg gradually grew less and now he could bend it, but to him his recovery seemed slow and he was impatient for the day when he could be on his feet again. Yet, to tell the truth, what was the point of worrying? Why shouldn't he stay in bed? In any case he

had nothing to fly. That was what everybody said. Yermakov said so, too:

"Get really fit first, Konstantin Ignatyevich. Take it easy and get fit. You've done your share of work, why shouldn't you take a rest? Seeing you've had the chance of being put to bed, you might at least make the most of it."

But Lunin only frowned. He didn't want to rest. When he was flying he never got tired, and if he did, that was his own business. It was this helplessness that irked him—oh, how hard he found it to be so helpless. He wasn't used to being looked after; he had lived on his own and had got into the habit of looking after himself; all the fuss that was made over him as he lay in the hospital made him feel thoroughly uncomfortable. They were all so concerned about him, about his health and his comfort—Uvarov and Proskuryakov, Yermakov and the pilots, the mechanics, too, and Masha, and, above all, Dr. Gromeko himself.

The doctor lived in the hospital—he slept in a sort of a nook partitioned off from the waiting-room—and Lunin saw more of him than of anybody else, saw him, too, in a quite different light. He could not decide what had happened: either the doctor had suddenly changed or Lunin was seeing something in him that he had missed before. He decided it was six of one and half a dozen of the other.

After all, he had not known that this young doctor had such strong, deft, clever hands before he saw him putting bones in joint, applying poultices, winding bandages, jabbing a syringe into a vein or simply turning his patient on his side to prevent his back growing numb. He had certainly not known that the doctor was so attentive and so actively good. Or that he knew so much.

Lunin would have been the first to admit that he was no judge of learning, for he possessed little of it himself—he had never got any further than secondary school. But in the years just before the war, especially after he and his wife had separated, he had read a great deal. Mostly he read popular science—astronomy, the history of

the Earth, biology. And now that he was on his own with the doctor he bombarded him with questions, which the doctor answered with thoroughness, animation and conviction. They talked about the war, about history, about the origin of life, about galaxies, about the solar system. The doctor told Lunin about Pasteur and Mechnikov, about vaccines and about the way living tissue is composed. These talks usually started in the evening and the lamp would go on burning in the ward long after midnight until the duty nurse would begin to complain.

Of course, this clever doctor had not quite thrown off that tendency to brag and put on airs that so astonished Lunin. And the more people there were present, the more that tendency showed itself. Altogether he was quite another man in company from what he was alone with Lunin. It was as though he did not want anyone to guess his merits, hoping they would have as poor opinion of him as possible. Even his voice would change—he would start speaking coarsely and do everything he could to be taken for a cynic and the most devil-may-care good-timer; but Lunin had the same impression as before—that all this was put on and unnatural to him, and it made him feel sorry for the doctor who evidently used this guise to conceal a certain shyness and lack of self-confidence.

Lunin had noticed a long time before, though, that after the row with Serov about Hilda, the doctor had quite dropped that line about his successes with women. The lesson had clearly served its purpose. And now, in Lunin's presence, the doctor received another lesson which robbed him of another of his favourite themes of conversation—surgical spirit.

Kuznetsov had dropped in on Lunin, wearing his officer's tunic with the junior lieutenant's rings on the sleeve for the first time. The doctor, who was modestly helping the nurse to wipe the windows at once became another man—as he always did when company turned up. Tossing the damp rag into a corner, he chortled:

"Hull-o-o-o, there! Shame on you, man, that officer's tunic ought to be christened. Think I don't know you drink our spirit neat? Quite right, too! Why spoil good stuff? And you haven't found time to drop in on your regiment doctor of an evening and share a noggin with him. Ekh, we could have had a real session."

Kuznetsov's face paled. Finally the doctor realized that something was wrong and stopped.

"I know what you're getting at, Doctor," Kuznetsov said, quietly at first, though there was something that boded ill in his voice. "I wonder whether you thought of it yourself or somebody put you up to it. Not that I care, though. But I'm not going to allow anyone to laugh at me, understand? There's nothing about that in the regulations. I won't have it!"

His voice had risen to a shout with these last words and he advanced on the doctor with such an expression on his face that a second later Lunin would have forgotten all about his game leg and sprung from the bed to put himself between the two men.

Kuznetsov, however, suddenly swung round and dashed out of the sick-bay, slamming the outer door.

The doctor remained standing in the middle of the room looking shaken. He was only just beginning to realize why Kuznetsov thought he was being laughed at. He wanted to say something to Lunin but remained silent, looking at his patient guiltily. After that incident Lunin never heard the doctor mention surgical spirit to anyone again.

One of Lunin's most frequent visitors was, of course, Slava. He made himself quite at home in the sick-bay, even taking his dinner with Lunin; he was for ever squabbling with the nurse and wheedling empty tablet-boxes out of the doctor—there was something about them he liked very much. During his early visits he had been upset and scared by Lunin's accident. He kept clutching at Lunin's hand and asking:

"Does it hurt?"

"Oh, just a bit," Lunin would tell him.

"I know it hurts a lot."

Slava had not forgotten about the menace of being sent to Siberia that hung over his head.

How could he? Every time they met, Yermakov mentioned Siberia and that aunt of his there. Yermakov was becoming more and more convinced that he ought to send Slava away and he made no secret of the fact that he was only waiting for a suitable occasion. The idea that the lad was growing up without going to school and learning gave him no peace of mind.

One day Yermakov and Deyev walked into the sick-bay to visit Lunin just when Slava was sitting beside the bed. As usual, Yermakov's first words to Slava were to remind him of the necessity of leaving for Siberia and going to school.

"You're growing up an ignoramus," he said. "And in our days, you know, an ignoramus is no good for anything. A useless member of society."

A look of fright flashed into Slava's eyes.

Turning to Lunin, Yermakov went on:

"To tell the truth all of us are very much to blame about the lad. It's fun for us to have him around, we don't want to part with him, but we're crippling him for life, you know. After all, he's a human being, not a plaything. He'll be lost if he doesn't go to school."

Suddenly Deyev broke in:

"Comrade Commissar, with your permission I'll take charge of his education."

"You?"

"Well, I started with the idea of being a teacher. I took a teachers' training course. . . ."

Yermakov reflected.

"You've a good deal of other work on your shoulders beside that, Deyev," he said with hesitation. "As it is you don't have a moment's spare time."

"We'll find the time."

"What's more, if you are going to teach him, you've got to be serious about it."

"I am serious, Comrade Commissar."

There was no room for doubt—the regiment knew only too well how thoroughly Deyev went about everything he took up. His offer was accepted. Yermakov said that in such circumstances he agreed to let Slava stay on for a while in the regiment. At the same time he warned Slava very seriously that if he slacked or took it into his head not to obey Deyev he would be taken to Volkhovstroi immediately, put on a train and sent to his aunt.

And so Slava began to study with Deyev. It cannot be said that he applied himself to his studies very willingly. He had never been particularly bright at school, and during the war he had quite got out of the habit of learning, besides forgetting nearly everything he knew. However, Deyev took him in hand with firm, calm perseverance and showed him no leniency whatever. They began from the very beginning—with simple arithmetic and the main rules of grammar. The fear of being sent to his aunt made Slava sit every morning for several hours and pore over his lessons. Then, before reporting to Deyev of whom he was a little afraid, he would carry his exercise books to Lunin for correction.

No time was lost in sending a letter to Slava's father, in which Yermakov and Lunin asked that the boy be left with the regiment and promised to look after his education.

One day Slava brought news to the sick-bay which made Lunin get out of bed earlier than the doctor had reckoned. Slava ran in shouting:

"They've arrived. They've arrived!"

"Who? What?"

"The planes! Ten of them for our squadron. The same type as One and Three Squadrons have got."

"Hand me my trousers, Doctor," said Lunin.

He dressed in a flash, grasped a stick, and limped out of the sick-bay.

CHAPTER TEN

Sukho Island

1

Every time Lunin flew over Lake Ladoga he saw not far from the road a tiny island with a very tall lighthouse on it. This island bore the strange name of Sukho—Dry Island. During the war years the light never shone and the little island seemed forsaken, empty, lifeless.

This, however, was a mistaken impression. The island

was inhabited by men of the Red Navy. They lived an unusual restricted life, a life of hardship and rigorous discipline.

Reveille was at six thirty. Day after day, month after month, with absolute precision.

The same precision and regularity was maintained in all the island's activities: parade, P.T., breakfast, political instruction, gun drill, firing practice, and so on, right up to the sounding of the last post and turning in. Every day at the same hour the gun crews manned the island's three guns and went through the drill that they had long ago learned by heart. Every day at precisely the same minute the watches were changed at the range-finder's platform, where the range-takers kept unceasing vigil over the constantly changing, constantly moving expanse of water that confined the island so closely on all sides.

But for this regularity, this constant activity, life on the island would have been impossible. Actually it was not a proper island, it was simply a big rock rising a little above the water. Not a single tree, not a bush, not a blade of grass, not a stream—nothing but a few tufts of brownish moss, as hard and dead as the rock itself. And thirty men had been living there without relief for over a year. Thirty men, a lighthouse, and three guns.

At the foot of the tower stood a little wooden hut, where before the war the lighthouse-keeper had lived. When war broke out the keeper had left and dug-outs were sunk in the hard, rocky soil of the island and covered with five layers of sturdy logs.

In these dug-outs lived men of the Red Navy, artillerymen in one, anti-aircraft gunners in the other. They had been landed on the island more than a year ago, when Hitler's armies were only approaching Leningrad, and since then not a single man had ever quitted the island.

For over a year they had seen nothing but the tower of the lighthouse rising straight above them, and the water all round. Only the seasons, only the winds changed. Clouds gathered now on the left, now on the right. The

great dawns and sunsets came and went. In summer, if the winds abated, the sky turned a pale blue, and the calm waters of the lake also acquired an extraordinary blueness. On clear days in winter the endless, unbroken expanse of snow all round gleamed so brightly that the men's eyes became inflamed with looking at it. But clear days were few both in winter and summer. Far more often the island was enveloped in fog, and thick clouds hung over the lighthouse. In winter the island was wrapped in swirling blizzards for weeks on end and in spring, summer and autumn there were long weeks of lashing rain. Storm followed storm, huge waves swept over the island and pounded at the foot of the lighthouse, and in the dug-outs, under the tightly battened hatches, it sounded as if a cannonade were booming overhead.

For over a year they had seen nothing but waves and hovering sea-gulls, but they still shared in the life of the whole country. Every evening, before going to sleep, they lay on the bunks arranged round the table and the iron stove in two tiers, and listened to the voice of a vibrating metal loudspeaker telling them what had happened at the fronts in the course of the day. The Party Organizer, Senior Sergeant Poleshchuk, a man of stocky build, spread the map whose tattered folds were stuck together with rice paper on the table and the gunners leaned out of the bunks to look at it.

The previous winter it had been on this map that they had traced the headlong retreat of the German armies from Moscow; with delight they had watched Poleshchuk heavily underlining the name of town after town in the Moscow Region that had been liberated by the Red Army. Spring, summer and half of autumn had passed since then. Now on the same map they watched the Germans cross the Don, penetrate into the North Caucasus, and reach the Volga. Every evening now for two months they had heard a brief communiqué about the fighting round Stalingrad. Nearly two thousand miles lay between them and Stalingrad, the

communiqués were short, but the fact that they were issued so regularly indicated that something huge and tremendously important was taking place at Stalingrad.

Besides the metal loudspeaker they had another link with the outside world—the launch that brought them shells, food, and mail. They loved this launch tenderly, for it brought them letters from their mothers and wives, and part of the love they could not show to their near ones they lavished on the launch instead.

The launch did not come regularly, in stormy weather it did not come at all. They waited for it with impatience, dreamed of it, rejoiced when it appeared, and even time itself was measured not in weeks, not in months, but in the periods that elapsed between one visit of the post launch and the next.

The launch brought newspapers for everyone, but not letters. Poleshchuk, for example, whose family lived in a village of Byelorussia, had not received a single letter all the time he had been on the island. Every letter that arrived was discussed by the whole dug-out, for they had nothing to hide from one another. And these letters, in their tenderness and courage, their yearning and hope, gave the men a picture of the whole country, the whole war.

Incidentally, they could see something of the war even from Sukho Island. The southern shore of the lake had been captured by the Germans, the northern, by the Finns, and on those shores there was always something burning. In the daytime the distant smoke of fires could be seen on the horizon, and at night dull purple blobs of flame hung on the edge of the sky. And nearly every day air battles were fought over the island. The pilots who so often roared over the lighthouse could have had no idea how attentively they were watched from below. The men on the island had learned to spot any type of Soviet or German plane at any distance, and they even maintained that they could recognize certain planes that came over the lighthouse particularly often.

There was plenty of activity in the air over the island, but there was even more on the water that surrounded it. Across the waters of Lake Ladoga lay the only route that linked besieged Leningrad with the rest of the country.

On clear winter days the men on Sukho Island could see in the distance long columns of loaded lorries moving across the ice. Even at night, if they watched keenly, they could see flashes of bluish light in the darkness as the drivers cautiously switched on their headlights to avoid hitting something or colliding or driving into a gap in the ice. And in summer, steamers plied along the same route, from east to west, and from west to east, towing barges. The sandbanks and underwater reefs that surrounded Sukho prevented them from approaching the island, but on clear days two or three puffs of smoke could always be seen on the horizon.

The Germans constantly tried to stop traffic across the lake. Messerschmitts strafed the convoys of lorries on the open ice, where there was no cover. Junkers bombed the caravans of barges and swooped down on the ships, attacked the wharves and the distributing centres. The whole existence of this "road of life" was a ceaseless battle that had lasted without a lull for a whole year.

This tense struggle was waged near the island itself, and the garrison watched but took no part.

Only the anti-aircraft gunners were something of an exception. Occasionally they had a pot at an enemy aircraft. But the artillerymen, the backbone of the garrison, had spent fourteen months on the island without firing a single shot in anger.

"Different people have different lives," said the Sergeant-Major Ivan Martynov. "Our is in a cage."

To Sergeant-Major Martynov the island seemed particularly cramped, for Martynov himself was tall and broad in the shoulders, a strapping fellow, and what was more, extremely active by nature. During training he had no difficulty in throwing a grenade from one end of the island

to the other. When he had any spare time from his duties, he would trot round the lighthouse on his long legs, making circle after circle, now one way, now the other.

No one on the island had had such experience of battle as Sergeant-Major Martynov. In the winter of 1940, during the Finnish campaign he had served in the marines and taken part in the storming of Vyborg. The Patriotic War had also given him a very exciting time to start with; he fought with the marines for Riga, for Pyarna, for Tallinn, for Peterhof, and then he fought on the outskirts of Leningrad itself. And all of a sudden at the height of the battle he had landed on Sukho Island and got stuck there.

In the dug-out of an evening he would often talk of the actions he had taken part in. Everyone already knew these tales by heart, but they still listened to them with the same willingness. No doubt Martynov really felt as if in the midst of a headlong rush he had fallen into a trap that had immediately snapped shut. And as he trotted round and round the lighthouse he did indeed look like a bear in a cage.

Senior Lieutenant Gusev, the battery commander, could not stand this bear-like loping. Whenever he spotted Martynov trotting round the lighthouse he would call him over and invent some job for him to do. And Martynov gladly set about doing it, for work soothed his constant yearning for action.

As well as being commander of the battery Senior Lieutenant Gusev was also the island's commandant. The whole island and all who lived on it were subordinate to him alone. He was gaunt, rather narrow-shouldered and held himself extremely upright. He did not live underground like all the others, but in the little wooden hut at the foot of the lighthouse, where the keeper had once lived. Apart from Senior Lieutenant Gusev, the only other person who occupied the hut was Sashka Stroganov, his orderly.

As soon as Sashka woke up in the morning, his first job was to run to the cook for hot water so that the senior lieutenant could shave. Sashka himself in view of his

extreme youth had never yet shaved, but Senior Lieutenant Gusev was as particular about his appearance as if he lived not on a wild rock in the middle of Ladoga, but in a big city, where he had to pay daily visits to the club or theatre. His trousers were always creased, his buttons and boots shone, he changed his collar every day. He demanded the same standard from all his subordinates and great storms arose on the island when Gusev noticed a hairy chin or a tarnished button.

From reveille to last post he saw to it that everything on the island followed its appointed course and that everyone was kept busy. He could not tolerate idleness. He feared it, for he realized that on this tiny scrap of land nothing could be more dangerous than time spent with nothing to do. The gun crews passed many hours a day in firing practice, getting every movement timed to a fraction of a second and executed with mechanical precision. Every day, at the same hours the men studied the hand grenade, the rifle, the submachine-gun, the machine-gun. And every day everything on the island was cleaned, scrubbed, tidied, and battened down, as on board ship.

"When our turn comes we've got to be like iron," Gusev once told Party organizer Poleshchuk.

Little Poleshchuk lifted his calm face with its kind, finely wrinkled eyes and said simply: "We will be, Comrade Lieutenant."

"But will our turn ever come?" asked Sashka Stroganov, the commandant's orderly.

But no one answered his question.

2

The morning of October 22, 1942, began like every other morning on Sukho Island.

"Reveille!" the duty orderly's voice rang out clearly as he came in.

An instant change came over the dug-out. Everything burst into life and the place became crowded and noisy. Everyone tumbled out of their bunks and at once started to get dressed. One after the other the sailors ran along the duck-boards, opened the door and burst out of the dug-out in a cloud of steam into the fresh air.

The wind was so strong that at first it was hard to breathe. The thunder of the waves that had been audible enough in the dug-out was now deafening.

Snow!

During the night the first snow of the year had fallen and Sukho Island was all in white.

And because the island was white the water all round seemed even darker. Low swift clouds were scudding over the very top of the lighthouse. It was not quite light yet, the horizon was wrapped in shadowy haze and the day promised to be a gloomy one.

Senior Lieutenant Gusev was already standing on the little flat square in front of the lighthouse, clean-shaven, upright, with his orderly Sashka Stroganov at his side. Gusev always attended the battery's morning parade in person. The gunners formed up, numbered, formed fours, turned and marched up and down in front of the lighthouse obeying the commands of Sergeant-Major Martynov whose voice was powerful enough to defeat any wind.

Sashka Stroganov was younger than anyone else on the island. On his round fresh smiling face there were two dimples—one in his left cheek, the other in his chin. Judging from his ways, his walk, his manner of wearing his sailor's cap, the careless shrug of his shoulders, he certainly considered himself a dashing young fellow.

Suddenly a range-taker came up to Gusev and reported sighting some ships through the telescope.

"How many?" Gusev asked.

"Impossible to tell exactly," the range-taker answered. "But more than twenty."

"Where are they heading?"

"So far straight for us."

"Where from?"

"The north-west, Comrade Senior Lieutenant. From over there."

The range-taker waved towards the distant horizon.

Everyone on the parade ground at once turned his head in that direction but there was nothing to see but the waves and the murky haze in the distance.

Without turning round or saying a word, Gusev held out his hand behind him and Sashka Stroganov, understanding at once, immediately put a pair of binoculars into his hand.

Gusev stared through his binoculars for a long time in silence.

"They aren't ours, Comrade Senior Lieutenant," said the sailor from the observation post. "We haven't got anything like that on Ladoga."

But Gusev was not inclined to talk.

"Martynov!" he shouted. "Follow me!"

He turned round and stepped through the narrow door into the lighthouse. The long-limbed Martynov plunged after him. After Martynov went Sashka Stroganov.

In the semi-darkness of the lighthouse Gusev ran up the iron spiral staircase that wound its way up to the top of the tower. Here and there a gleam of light came from a small window, through which only waves could be seen dropping away below them. At the top light streamed in through a wide-open door. Gusev stepped through it and came out on a small platform perched at a terrifying height above the sea.

Martynov and Sashka Stroganov caught up with him.

Here the wind was so strong that Sashka gripped the rail with both hands. The waves were sweeping towards the island and the lighthouse, but from the top of the lighthouse the platform seemed to be floating above the waves.

Gusev stood with his feet slightly apart looking through his binoculars. Then he silently handed the binoculars to Martynov.

"What's in the first column, launches?" Martynov asked, keeping the binoculars to his eyes.

"Yes," Gusev affirmed. "See their guns?"

"Looks as if they've got two each. . . ."

"That's right. One in the bows, the other in the stern."

"What do you make of the craft in the second column?" Martynov asked, still peering. "Long, narrow things. . . ."

"Self-propelled barges," said Gusev. "See how many men there are in them. They're black with people. It's a landing party. They're landing barges."

"They've got two guns each too."

Soon there was no need for binoculars to make out the approaching vessels. Dark amid the white-capped waves, they came on at first in two separate columns, then the columns merged and the ships spread out and began to embrace the island in a wide are on the north, east and west.

"They're changing formation," said Sashka Stroganov.

"Thirty of them," Martynov proclaimed still looking through the binoculars.

"The same as us," said Sashka.

"What's that?" Gusev exclaimed, either not understanding, or failing to hear because of the wind.

"I said there are thirty of them, and thirty of us here on the island," Sashka exclaimed and his teeth flashed in a smile. "One for each ship. It's an equal fight, Comrade Senior Lieutenant."

"Three guns against sixty," grunted Martynov.

Gusev frowned.

"No point in counting," he said sharply. "Either we hold out, or the door to Leningrad closes."

"I'm not counting," said Martynov. "You know yourself how many months I've been waiting for them. . . ."

Gusev took the binoculars from him: "Downstairs! Action stations!" he commanded.

Down below, on the ground, every man was already at his post; the crews were manning their guns, others were dragging shell boxes out of the dug-out that served as a store. The commander of the first gun was Baskakov, the commander of the second, Pavel Ulichev, the commander of the third, Pugach. With tense faces they sighted the guns and the long barrels moved round slowly. Everything was ready, they were only waiting for the order from Gusev.

But Gusev gave no order. He stood on a rock near the lighthouse and watched the enemy ships. The ships came nearer, the distance grew less and less. Gusev waited: he wanted to be certain of his target.

The enemy ships came even nearer. Now their guns and the troops in them were clearly visible. Signalmen were waving flags on the leading launch. Again the ships changed formation; the launches made way for the landing craft to come forward.

The gun-crew commanders crouched over their guns. The whole island waited for Senior Lieutenant Gusev to give the word: "Fire!"

But he did not have time to say it.

Something happened that no one could have foreseen.

From somewhere on the left, not very near, two gunshots were heard. Two columns of water leaped into the air near the leading enemy launch.

With his binoculars to his eyes Gusev ran round the lighthouse.

And suddenly two more shots followed in quick succession. A column of flame leapt up on the spot where the leading launch had been, and the air over the lake quivered with the roar of an explosion.

Everyone saw the little warship that had popped up somewhere from behind the island and was tearing towards the enemy squadron with both guns firing.

3

The ship that had been first to open fire on the enemy force was a little mine-sweeper of the Ladoga flotilla—ТЩ-100. On the night of October 22, 1942, it had been on patrol in this area of the lake.

The mine-sweeper was commanded by Senior Lieutenant Pyotr Konstantinovich Kargin. Kargin was twenty-seven and a thorough-going sailor, who loved the sea and had dreamed of sailing on it ever since he was a boy, although he had been born and brought up in the steppes of Kazakhstan, in the very heart of the continent.

On that murky early morning the look-out had sighted ships approaching Sukho Island from the north-west. Kargin picked up his binoculars, saw the launches, saw the armed and self-propelled landing barges, and realized what was happening in a flash.

The Germans had decided to capture Sukho Island and use it to threaten the last line of communication between besieged Leningrad and the rest of the country.

Evidently the Germans had made long and careful preparations for this operation. Somewhere in the north-west corner of the lake, probably in the region of Keksgolm, which was occupied by the Finns, they had secretly concentrated and armed a force of vessels specially equipped for landing operations. No landing craft or launches had ever been seen on Ladoga before. They must have been brought up in sections by rail and assembled on the spot, specially for this operation.

The Germans had laid their plans thoroughly and were not taking any chances. Before launching their attack they had built up overwhelming superiority in numbers. They had made sure of surprise. The most difficult part of the operation—the crossing of Lake Ladoga from Keksgolm to Sukho under cover of night—had already been accomplished. All they had to do now was capture a small island

defended by a handful of sailors, which must have seemed to them an easy task.

On Kargin's orders, Sokolyuk, the mine-sweeper's wireless operator, transmitted all details of the situation to the command of the flotilla. But Kargin realized that for the next two or three hours the command would be able to do nothing to help the island, for he knew that the ships of the flotilla were scattered over a wide area and none of them were near at hand. And in the meantime, the next thirty minutes would decide everything, then it would be too late.

It so happened that his mine-sweeper was near Sukho that morning. Could that fact alter the situation? The mine-sweeper's two guns against sixty.... The voice of reason said that under such circumstances ТЩ-100 could alter nothing. But....

The point was that Kargin suspected the enemy had not yet spotted his ship. At his murky hour the silhouette of ТЩ-100 had probably merged with that of Sukho Island and the surrounding rocks sticking up out of the water.

Under cover of the island and the lighthouse the mine-sweeper moved into position to attack the enemy. The island was so low that from his bridge Kargin could see the whole broad semi-circle of enemy ships. Having spread out round the island on the north, they were changing formation; the launches were making way for the landing craft to go forward. Only one launch seemed to be keeping outside the formation. It raced about from side to side with signalmen waving their flags diligently on its deck.

Time to attack.

ТЩ-100 plunged bows-under into a big wave, rounded the island on the west and came out in front of the enemy ships.

Surely they had been noticed now. The leading launch suddenly slowed down and a landing craft on the extreme right flank turned away rather stupidly to port.

Kargin measured the distance to the leading launch by eye—twenty-eight cables. ТЩ-100 moved in to attack at full speed. Twenty-five cables. He could not hold his fire any longer.

"Fire!"

The mine-sweeper shuddered from stem to stern and two jets of water leapt up in front of the launch.

"Fire!"

A hit.

The leading enemy launch heeled over, shipped water on the starboard side and righted itself again. Then two yellow tongues of flame snaked out of her and the menacing roar of the explosion rolled over the lake. Its fuel tank had blown up. The launch was on fire from end to end. Black smoke swirling in the wind hid it from view.

Kargin heard a triumphant roar of voices and, glancing down, saw the excited jubilant faces of his crew.

"Fire!"

They must take advantage of the Germans' confusion, they must not give them time to recover.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Now ТЩ-100 was flying straight at the long landing barge that had approached nearer than any of the others to the island. The whole length of its flat starboard side was exposed. The deck was black with soldiers.

"Fire! Fire!"

An explosion. The barge's bows began to sink rapidly; the soldiers were crowded together in the unnaturally raised stern. They must be finding it cramped there.

Another hit. Where did that come from? They were firing from the island! The island's battery had opened up. And what shooting! Another hit, and another. . . .

The barge was sinking but its engines had not stopped and were forcing it along in jerks. It wallowed crabwise towards the island until finally it heeled over sharply on its side and ran ashore on a sandbank among the foaming breakers.

ТЩ-100 transferred her big guns on other targets and only the machine-gunners continued to rake the steeply inclined deck of the half-sunken landing barge. Over the chattering jerking muzzles of their guns they watched the deck clearing as the enemy soldiers fell into the water.

However, ТЩ-100 was getting into difficulties. It had exploited the advantages of its surprise attack to the full. Now the enemy had had time to recover and although the island's three guns were firing ceaselessly, the enemy's superior fire-power was beginning to make itself felt.

Every gun that the launches and landing craft possessed was firing at the mine-sweeper. The water was spouting and foaming all round her. Some of the shells burst so close that fountains of spray swept over her deck. Kargin twisted ТЩ-100 this way and that, steering in a wide zig-zag and changing course every thirty seconds to avoid being hit. But the enemy's fire grew even more intense and it was clear that the mine-sweeper must withdraw.

ТЩ-100 doubled back round the western tip of the island and slipped out of range to the south.

4

The garrison of the island watched the little mine-sweeper's daring attack on the enemy force with admiration and delight. When the leading launch went up in flames, there was a jubilant roar from the gunners.

"Good shooting! That was a hit, eh?" Sashka Stroganov shouted to Sergeant-Major Martynov, jumping in the air. "All their top dogs gone to feed the fishes, eh?"

The island's battery went into action at once. Helped by the mine-sweeper's gunners, it shattered and sunk the landing barge that had come nearest the island. Its wild lurching and destruction in full view of everyone only a

few hundred yards from the island filled the garrison with a joyful awareness of its strength. The battery's three guns put up a continuous barrage.

Senior Lieutenant Gusev had something like a command post of his own—a little dug-out with an observation slit that provided a view on all sides. This dug-out was placed a little behind Ulichev's gun and was connected by telephone with the commanders of all three guns. Not that there was much need for a telephone, for the guns stood so close together that orders from the command post could easily be given by word of mouth. Everything on the little island was cramped; everyone, from the man at the range-finder to the wireless-operator crouched over his set in a little dug-out next door to the command post, was practically within arm's reach.

Gusev did not go into his command post at once. At the beginning of the battle he stood by the range-taker, upright, shoulders braced, a little paler than usual, watching the movements of the enemy ships through his binoculars. The range-taker kept giving out the ranges and Gusev issued his orders in a calm, steady, ringing voice, as though he were directing a firing practice.

From time to time he removed the binoculars from his eyes and watched the work of the gun-crews. This was the first testing of his battery, the testing of all he had done for a whole year. Had he trained his men well? He felt a thrill of pleasure as he saw how coordinated and confident were their movements, how swiftly and faultlessly they executed his orders, how well each man knew his duties and how rapidly one shot followed another. The long barrels of the guns swung round smoothly, then jerked; and through the round lenses of his binoculars Gusev saw the shells bursting just where he wanted them to burst.

He realized that the confusion caused by the mine-sweeper's sudden attack would not last long and he hastened to make as full use of it as possible. Choosing

the most vulnerable targets, he kept his three guns pumping shells into the enemy. A shell struck a large and clumsy landing barge. With its steering wrecked the barge started going round and round in circles. Smoke poured out of another. Over there was a fire.... The men cheered every hit.

But every moment Gusev felt more and more worried about the mine-sweeper.

From the island it was easy to see what a furious concentration of fire the enemy ships were bringing to bear on ТЩ-100. It was as if they had suddenly been roused from a daze. The water boiled and foamed with exploding shells on every side of the little ship. The air over the lake shuddered with the jarring roar of artillery fire. The mine-sweeper dodged and twisted but it seemed as if destruction awaited her at every turn. Now Gusev directed all his efforts to helping the mine-sweeper, concentrating his fire on the launches that were nearest her and attacking her with the greatest fury. This certainly relieved ТЩ-100's position, but at times Gusev did not believe she would escape the tightening ring of enemy fire, and he was as delighted as the rest of the garrison when ТЩ-100 at last skirted the island and vanished from view.

The enemy did not pursue the mine-sweeper; apparently they did not attach much importance to her in spite of the fact that the little ship had caused them considerable loss by her sudden attack. The enemy ships stuck to their basic plan, which had been worked out in detail beforehand and was arranged in stages. The next stage was to bring all their fire-power to bear on the island, so as to make any resistance to the landing impossible. ТЩ-100 was scarcely out of sight when the landing barges and launches opened fire on the island with all guns.

When dozens of guns concentrate their fire at close range on a very small piece of land, it becomes very difficult to exist there. Splinters of rock and iron screamed across the island amid the deafening and continuous roar

of explosions, mowing down everything in their path. The rocky surface of the island, which seemed so hard and firm that nothing could break it, was pitted and ploughed up in the course of a few minutes.

When the barrage started, Gusev unhurriedly stepped into the little dug-out of his command post and went on giving orders while observing the enemy through his slit. The semi-circle of landing barges advanced slowly, firing all the time. As the minutes passed the hurricane of fire directed against the island became more and more intense.

But they won't stop us shooting, Gusev thought. He was well aware that the sole purpose of all this noise was to silence his three guns. But the battery did not falter for a moment; its steady, accurate fire continued round after round. Gusev noted with satisfaction that the enemy ships were becoming more and more affected by the fire of his guns. The landing barges' advance on the island became slower and less confident. Now, they were scarcely moving at all. Gusev concentrated all the fire of his guns on any barge that got ahead of the others. The barge would at once begin to retreat and swerve about, and the neighbouring barges would steer away from it and try to hide behind each other. But there were many barges and they were dispersed in a long line; while one retreated, the others advanced. And the battery had to transfer its fire rapidly and frequently.

Now and then the enemy launches attempted to help the landing barges to advance. They would come out in front and tear straight at the island, firing madly. But the battery swung its guns round quickly and stopped them before they could cover half the distance. The launches twisted and turned among the spouting columns of water, then hastily retired behind the barges.

Nevertheless the battery's position was becoming more and more serious. The breastworks protecting the guns had already been damaged in several places by shells. There were wounded. At one moment, hearing a tremendous roar

behind him, Gusev thought the lighthouse tower was collapsing. But when he looked round, he saw that the lighthouse was intact, although wrapped in smoke. The little wooden hut at its foot, where Gusev had once lived, had been set on fire by a shell.

Then Gusev's dug-out suffered a direct hit. The tough concrete wall stood the strain. Gusev and Sashka were severely shaken and sprinkled with earth but otherwise unhurt. But the heavy logs of the roof had shifted slightly and sunk, and one corner of the observation slit was blocked. The western half of the horizon was excluded from Gusev's field of vision. While he stayed in the dug-out he could not see the whole force of enemy ships. So Gusev had to leave his command post.

He went outside, brushed the dirt off his uniform and settled himself with his binoculars behind the breastwork of Pavel Ulichev's gun. All three guns of the battery were still in action.

Now the launches and landing barges were even closer. Not only their guns but the men in them were clearly visible.

The flat-bottomed landing barges were tossed about by the waves and this prevented them from aiming properly. Although the island was quite near, many shells whined harmlessly overhead or fell short in the water, raising silvery jets of spray. But several hits had been registered; the island looked as if it had been ploughed up from end to end and the rocks seemed to have changed their shape.

Pugach's gun was the first to be knocked out. It lay silent among the shattered remains of the breastwork with its mangled barrel sticking up in the air like an elephant's trunk. But the two other guns kept up their fire. The breastwork round Ulichev's gun was still intact and behind this breastwork sat Senior Lieutenant Gusev. When shells burst on the island he did not even lower his head. Hold-

ing his binoculars to his eyes with his left hand he signalled with his right. Sashka Stroganov sat at his feet behind the breastwork. Sometimes Gusev shouted an order in his ear and Sashka crawled off to carry it out. Now he would help one of the men to bring up shells, now he would drag fresh wounded to the dug-out, now he would send a radio message to the command of the flotilla.

The crash of shells falling on the island and the thunder of the two remaining guns mingled in an almost ceaseless roar, but during a brief lull a joyful shout went up. The sailors manning Baskakov's gun jumped about and waved their white caps in the air. Answering shouts came from the men at Pavel Ulichev's gun. The whole island rejoiced at the success of Seaman Gunner Baskakov who had set one of the landing barges on fire. Thick smoke was pouring from the barge and there were launches all round taking off the survivors.

A few minutes after the barge caught fire Pavel Ulichev sank a launch with a direct hit. This fresh success was greeted with rejoicing. But by now half the defenders of the island were out of action. Resentful of the delay, the enemy pounded the island with even greater fury, striving to crush all resistance.

A shell burst right in front of the breastwork of Pavel Ulichev's gun. Senior Lieutenant Gusev dropped his binoculars, toppled over, then collapsed into Sashka's arms. Ulichev and all the men in his crew rushed over to Gusev.

"Comrade Senior Lieutenant . . . I'll take you to the dug-out. . . . Hold on to me," Sashka exclaimed.

But Gusev pushed him aside and sat down on a stone that had fallen out of the breastwork. He had been wounded just above the knee by a shell splinter. His trouser leg was sodden with blood and he had turned very pale. But he glanced angrily at the sailors crowding round him and shouted:

"Back to your stations! How dare you leave your gun!"

The men returned to their gun looking disconcerted,

and Gusev, his face twisted with pain, stretched his wounded leg out in front of him, took his binoculars from Sashka and once again gave a sharp wave with his hand:

"Fire!"

But then a disaster occurred far worse than anything that had happened before. An enemy shell landed on one of the boxes of ammunition stored in a shallow pit behind the guns. Ammunition had been taken out of the dug-out that served as a magazine and carried to this pit because the dug-out itself was too far away from the guns and the number of able-bodied men on the island was rapidly decreasing. The shattered box of ammunition caught fire and there was an explosion.

It was the most terrible explosion that had ever been heard on the island. Everyone who was sitting or standing was thrown to the ground. The lighthouse lurched perceptibly and looked as if it was about to crash down in a heap of rubble.

The lighthouse remained standing, but three sailors who had been carrying shells to the guns were killed outright and their mutilated bodies were thrown far away from the place of the explosion.

But that was not all. As Gusev raised his head, he saw yellow flames break out in the pit among the broken planks and, crackling in the wind, snake towards the other boxes of ammunition.

These boxes were jumbled together at the bottom of the pit. The explosion had tossed them about and broken them, and bits of the wooden casing were lying all around. This dry wood was fine fuel and the wind would not let the flames die. When they reached those boxes there would be an explosion that would not leave a single shell on the island, perhaps not even a single man.

"Sasha!" Gusev called.

Sashka Stroganov glanced in the direction of his commanding officer's pointing finger.

"I see," he whispered. "I'll go. . . ."

Gusev looked sadly at him and nodded. Somebody had to try and put out the flames in the pit. Before it was too late. If it was not too late already.... He was fond of Sashka Stroganov and knew that Sashka was fond of him. But who else could he send? He would have crawled there himself if he could, but his wounded leg made it impossible for him to move. The guns must go on firing, they could not spare a single man. There was no one else at hand. The only person was Sashka.

Sashka crawled out from behind the breastwork and wormed his way between the rocks. His agile body moved with easy swiftness. When a shell landed, he would crouch for a second and stop dead. Then he would crawl on. Gusev tried to watch Ulichev's gun, the enemy ships, and Sashka, all at once. Would he get there? Would he be in time?

Sashka reached the pit, but someone had got there before him.

In the smoke at the bottom of the pit a stockily built man was stamping out the burning chips of wood, snatching up hot brands in his fingers and hurling them away. Some of them flew into the water and went out with a hissing sound.

It was Poleshchuk the Party organizer. When the men carrying shells to the guns had been killed by the explosion, he started carrying shells himself to Baskakov's gun. Seeing the flames spreading at the bottom of the pit, he grasped the situation at once. Either he must dash away to the other end of the island, or he must jump down and quench the flames before the explosion came. He jumped into the pit.

Some of the shell boxes were already beginning to smoulder. Other boxes were broken and the shells had rolled out and were lying among the smoking fragments. Coughing in the smoke, Poleshchuk worked hurriedly, stamping out the flames, throwing brands out of the pit, turning boxes over and sprinkling them with soil, and

dragging shells away. But he could not be everywhere and, besides, the smoke prevented him from seeing. Poleshchuk fought the flames expecting an explosion at any moment.

When he saw Sashka approaching through the smoke, he waved to him to keep away, but since Sashka, instead of keeping away, jumped straight into the pit, Poleshchuk showed him what to do and almost immediately they had the flames under control.

Now the carrying of shells depended solely on them. The guns had to maintain their fire at all costs and Sashka and Poleshchuk crawled back and forth between the pit and the guns while the barrage raged ceaselessly over the island. Poleshchuk supplied Baskakov's gun, Sashka carried shells for Pavel Ulichev's.

The island's guns continued to fire and Baskakov succeeded in sinking yet another enemy launch. But a shell landed close to Pavel Ulichev's gun and blew out part of the breastwork. At that moment Sashka Stroganov was crawling back from the pit with a shell in his arms. At first he thought the whole crew, including Gusev and Ulichev, had been killed. They were all lying about in various attitudes and no one moved. But as Sashka crawled nearer, Ulichev stirred and slowly dragged himself to his feet.

"Give it to me," he said and held out his hands for the shell Sashka was carrying.

Ulichev could scarcely stand. His face was smeared with blood, and blood was soaking through his torn shirt. He had been wounded, more than once probably. But the gun had to fire and he could not leave it. The other men who had been thrown down by the blast also stirred and began to get up.

Sashka ran to Gusev:

"Comrade Senior Lieutenant!"

Gusev was lying on his back with his mouth open, breathing in loud gasps. This time he had been wounded in

the chest by a shell splinter, and he breathed with a choking sound.

"Lift me up," he said when Sashka bent over him.

"Hold on to me, Comrade Senior Lieutenant. I'll take you to the dug-out. . . ."

"Lift me up!" Gusev repeated angrily and, putting his arms round Sashka's neck, began to pull himself up. "That's it. . . . Now let me sit. . . . Don't you understand what people say?"

"Comrade Senior Lieutenant. . . ."

"Do as I tell you!"

Sashka helped him into a sitting position.

Gusev clutched at a rock to save himself from falling. Loss of blood was making everything go dark before his eyes, but he managed to see that the landing barges had come nearer. I mustn't fall now, he thought.

He signalled to Ulichev with his hand: "Fire!"

The sound of the shot was drowned in the unceasing roar of shells bursting on the island. Splinters whined through the air and clanged against the metal shield of the gun.

And suddenly there was silence. The bombardment of the island ceased.

In the unexpected stillness Gusev thought the landing had started.

But he was mistaken.

5

The enemy ships had stopped bombarding the island because they had been obliged to turn all their fire on to the mine-sweeper ТЩ-100, which was again tearing into action.

ТЩ-100 had come out of its first attack unharmed. Only the last shell that had been sent after her as she rounded the island and withdrew to the south had hit its target.

Though it had not killed anyone, this shell had wrecked

the mine-sweeper's radio, and ТЩ-100 suddenly found herself cut off from the command of the flotilla.

Now, more than at any other time, Senior Lieutenant Kargin would have liked to know the whereabouts of the other ships in the flotilla and what they were going to do. He could then have coordinated his actions with them and become part of some general operation.

He summoned Sokolyuk, the wireless operator, to the bridge.

Sokolyuk reported with a bandaged head, a length of copper wire in his teeth and a pair of pliers in his hand.

"What's the matter?" Kargin asked glancing at the bandage round his head.

Sokolyuk waved his hand carelessly. "Oh, that's just Doctor Bernadsky. . . ."

When the shell burst he had struck the top of his head on a crossbeam and blood had streamed down his face. He had paid no attention to it except for wiping his forehead with the back of his hand to keep the blood out of his eyes, and immediately started assembling the remains of his shattered set. The ship's doctor had almost had to use force to get a bandage round his head.

"Well, let's have your report," said Kargin.

Sokolyuk enumerated all the damage caused by the explosion.

"We've got to have radio," said Kargin, looking hopefully into Sokolyuk's eyes. "Can you put it right, Vanya?"

Sokolyuk pondered for a moment.

"I can, Comrade Senior Lieutenant," he replied.

"How long will it take you?"

"Forty minutes."

Kargin glanced at his watch.

"I give you half an hour."

Sokolyuk frowned and pondered again.

"All right, half an hour, Comrade Senior Lieutenant! May I go?"

"Go on."

Half an hour! It was an enormous time. In half an hour the Germans might occupy the island, and then it would be all over.

ТЩ-100 was now south of the island and the island and the lighthouse were clearly outlined against the gloomy sky above her stern. They were steaming away from the island but the whole ship's company was looking back.

They guessed what was happening there. The fire of the enemy guns that they had only just escaped was now concentrated with all its force on the island, a stationary target, a target that had no ability to manoeuvre and escape the bombardment, as they had escaped it. No, there could be no question of waiting half an hour while Sokolyuk got the radio working and made contact with the command. They must act now, at once!

Kargin turned his ship back to face the guns he had only just escaped.

For the second time that morning ТЩ-100 approached Sukho Island from the south. Again the enemy ships came into view over the low silhouette of the island. But now there was a difference. Before, Kargin had been able to count on surprise, now he could not.

Of course, the enemy had spotted the mine-sweeper. However, all their fire was still directed at the island and ТЩ-100 steamed on amid silence.

The landing craft had now got as near the island as they could without running aground on the submerged reefs and sandbanks. The Germans were already preparing to disembark their landing parties and were subjecting the island to a final crushing bombardment. They were working according to a pre-arranged plan with undisturbed confidence. They had no doubt of their superior strength and the fresh appearance of the little Soviet mine-sweeper did not make them change their course of action.

In this lack of attention to his ship Kargin sensed contempt. All right, we shall see, he thought.

ТЩ-100 ploughed on straight towards the landing barges. Nearer, nearer, nearer....

"Fire!"

On the deck of the nearest barge soldiers were fitting out the rubber boats that were to carry them across the last intervening stretch of water to the island. One shell landed, then another.... The barge heeled over and began to sink. But it could not sink completely because the water was too shallow. The waves swept over it and the Germans jumped into the water and tried to swim to the neighbouring barges.

No one on the mine-sweeper watched to see what happened to it after that. They raced along the line of landing barges and launches, raking them with shells and machine-gun bullets. Their speed was so great that sometimes the gunners could not even see the results of their fire. Nevertheless ТЩ-100 was making its presence felt. She had spoiled the Germans' rigid adherence to their plan and forced them to halt the bombardment of the island and bring the fire of launches and landing craft to bear on herself.

The water round ТЩ-100 boiled and foamed with shell-bursts. Again she steered in zigzags, weaving from right to left and left to right. The enemy lost formation and became crowded together in a bunch, firing wildly. It was only thanks to this that ТЩ-100 managed to survive. Nevertheless some of the shells struck home and deep scars appeared on her steel sides.

Fortunately her guns and engines had remained unharmed. So were her crew. Now, however, she must break out of the circle of fire and withdraw. This time the enemy fired after her with much greater tenacity. Several launches even gave chase but were beaten off by accurate shooting. Rounding the western tip of the island, ТЩ-100 again headed south.

Kargin glanced at his watch. It was not even twenty minutes since Sokolyuk had started to repair the shattered

wireless. There could be no getting in touch with the command yet. But it was no use waiting, they must keep fighting. The Germans must be harassed and given no breathing space. ТЩ-100 must do everything possible to delay them in carrying out their landing. She was still afloat, her guns could still fire, she must go back into the thick of the enemy and give them no peace.

And for the third time ТЩ-100 returned to Sukho Island.

This time she was greeted with nothing like the same indifference as before. As soon as she poked her bows round the western tip of the island the enemy squadron swamped her with fire.

That's right, thought Kargin. Fire at us! We'll take it somehow . . . we'll dodge. Fire at us, but give the island a rest. He knew he had to play for time.

And ТЩ-100 stubbornly continued its mad game with the enemy ships. Steering an intricate, twisting course, she weaved her way into the heart of their formation, firing with both her big guns and all her light armament. When the enemy's fire became too intense she broke away and, steering an even more complicated course, took refuge behind the island and headed south. But no sooner had the enemy stopped firing after her than she turned round and the game began again.

ТЩ-100 attacked and withdrew. But every time the attack became shorter and the business of getting away, more hazardous. The enemy gunners were getting more accurate, the shells fell closer, hits were more frequent and more and more dents appeared in her armour plating. The most serious thing was that the enemy launches were showing real determination to defend the landing craft. When ТЩ-100 appeared, they raced out in front and attacked her yapping and snarling like a pack of hounds and driving her away from the island at a tremendous cost in ammunition. ТЩ-100 snapped back furiously, twisting from side to side in an attempt to shake off her pursuers.

The time came at last when Kargin began to fear that he would no longer be able to break away from the launches. They had their teeth into the little mine-sweeper and it looked as if they were determined not to let her go. Setting up a great bow wave, ТЩ-100 raced round the island amid shell bursts and spouting jets of water, pursued by a dozen or so fast and excellently armed launches.

And then Kargin noticed another launch, unlike the rest. It was rather bigger, with a deck.... But of course!—it was a Soviet launch of the "sea-hunter" class! Where had she come from?

Through his binoculars Kargin made out the identification marks on her side—МО-171. Who was the commander of МО-171? Kargin had rarely met any of the commanders of the "sea-hunter" flotilla and knew very few of them. Suddenly, however, he remembered the commander of МО-171. A little thin fellow, very young.... Yes, about twenty-three. Fair hair, but dark eyes. His name was Kovalevsky.... Lieutenant Kovalevsky. Kargin had seen him several times in Novaya Ladoga, and before the war had once met him at the Navy House in Kronstadt and played a game of billiards with him. Won easily too....

Moving at full speed, МО-171 headed straight for the stretch of water between ТЩ-100 and the enemy launches. What was he up to, this Kovalevsky? What was he going to do?

Suddenly dense smoke began to pour out of the Soviet "sea-hunter" and streamed out behind her in a great shaggy tail, heavy, impenetrably dark, billowing out on all sides.

A smoke-screen!

So Kovalevsky, the first of the flotilla to come to their aid, had grasped the situation at once and decided the first thing to do was to give ТЩ-100 a breathing space, time to shake off her pursuers. Taking all the enemy fire on himself he led the pack of launches away and, making smoke, screened Kargin's mine-sweeper from the battle, from the enemy's ships, and from the island.

"Comrade Senior Lieutenant. . . ."

Kargin turned round.

Sokolyuk was standing in front of him.

"Well?" he asked and looked at his watch.

Thirty-four minutes had passed. Nearly thirty-five.

"The radio's been going for four minutes," said Sokolyuk.

"Sent a message to the command?"

"All of them."

"What did you get back?"

"An order from the flotilla commander."

He handed Kargin a message sheet. The commander informed ТЩ-100 that help was on the way and ordered Kargin to do everything possible to delay the landing.

"Thank you, Comrade Sokolyuk," said Kargin. "Thanks, Vanya! We've been carrying out the commander's order for some time already."

And he steered his ship round the smoke-screen to help MO-171, which was now bearing the full weight of the battle.

6

On October 22, Lunin's squadron made its first sortie in the new aircraft.

Lunin had not expected to have to fly on that murky October morning. All aircraft had been grounded for several days because of mist, low cloud, and drizzling rain. That night the first snow had fallen and whitened the airfield. By dawn most of it had melted and what was left lay about here and there in greyish patches. Lunin was about to go to the mess for breakfast when he had a phone call from regiment headquarters telling him to prepare the whole squadron for take-off.

"Briefing later," the regiment chief of staff told him, and hung up.

The regiment headquarters dug-out was only a few

yards from Lunin's and in a few minutes a mechanic from the regiment ran in to say that the Germans were trying to land troops on Sukho Island.

All the pilots had seen the island many times and they all realized the significance of the news. The fate of Sukho Island was the fate of Leningrad. If Sukho Island fell, communication with Leningrad would be cut and the ring of the blockade would close.

The chief of staff gave the briefing:

"You are to act as a covering force for the Stormoviks. Rendezvous as usual, over the cape."

The squadron took off and immediately flew into mist. Lunin turned his head and could not see his formation; even the nearest aircraft only showed themselves in snatches. But the voices of the pilots coming over the intercom told him that they were with him.

He had not yet got used to his new machine—it was only a few days since he had flown it for the first time—and now he delighted in its responsiveness, its speed, and steadiness, in the almost human intelligence and alertness of its instruments. Everything about this graceful powerful machine seemed to him so much the embodiment of reason that he felt the same kind of involuntary respect for it as one feels for a living person. And at the same time the aircraft was an appendage of himself, it obeyed only him, it turned him into a legendary giant, increasing his strength a thousandfold. And now, with such mighty and intelligent strength to aid him, he was impatient to meet his old and tested enemies—the Messerschmitts. He wondered how they would behave now. If only they dared to fly in such weather. . . .

The waters of the lake seemed black and only the shores were edged with a grim line of white breakers. The fighters reached the rendezvous first. The clouds were so low that at times they scraped the tops of the pine-trees on the cape. Lunin's squadron circled the cape several times, flying as low as possible so as not to miss the Stormoviks.

A minute later they spotted them—six hunchbacked grey shadows crossing the shore-line and flying low over the water. The fighters formed up all round the Stormoviks like an escort. The cape melted away into the mist and nothing could be seen from the planes except the dark water and the clouds almost touching the waves. In clear weather Sukho Island was visible nearly all the way from the cape, but now they flew for some time before it at last came into view.

The first thing Lunin noticed were two columns of smoke rising straight into the clouds. They were two fires—one on the island, the other on the water. On the island it was the wooden hut at the foot of the lighthouse that was burning, on the water a big barge with its bows awash and its stern raised high in the air was wrapped in flame.

Lunin spotted several wrecked barges near the island, their remains floating in the water were easily visible from the air. But there were far more ships still afloat. The island was locked in a horse-shoe of guns and the shells could be seen throwing up bright columns of water and dark spurts of sand and rock.

Lunin watched this only a few seconds, for his attention was immediately diverted. South of the island he saw a little ship—a mine-sweeper—with a black Junkers bombing it. He saw the mine-sweeper's ack-ack guns pointing upwards and firing, and another Junkers plunging out of the clouds, then a third, a fourth. Having dropped their bombs, the Junkers withdrew into the clouds, made a fresh run, and bombed again.

When they had planned the attack on Sukho Island the Germans had apparently counted on doing without aircraft. The weather was bad, and besides, the task of crushing the island's one and only shore battery seemed a fairly simple matter. The aircraft had been called in during the fighting to deal with the troublesome mine-sweeper ТЩ-100 that was proving such a hindrance to the attackers. The Junkers fell on the mine-sweeper during one of its

innumerable withdrawals to the south of the island in preparation for a fresh sally against the landing barges. They came out of the low clouds right over the mine-sweeper and were badly shaken by the point-blank fire of the mine-sweeper's anti-aircraft guns. It was this fear of the mine-sweeper's ack-ack gunners that upset their aim but although their bombs fell in the water, merely splashing the mine-sweeper's deck, the Junkers were persistent; they went into the clouds and came back again.

Lunin left six of his aircraft to cover the Stormoviks and led Tatarenko, Karyakin, and Ryabushkin to attack the Junkers. The Junkers dodged away into the clouds and only one of them was caught over the mine-sweeper. Attacked on all four sides, it was immediately shot down into the water. Karyakin and Ryabushkin came upon another Junkers in the cloud. A jubilant shout from Karyakin in Lunin's ear-phones told him that they had downed it at once.

Then it turned out that there were Messerschmitts in the area, evidently sent to protect the Junkers. Ten Messerschmitts appeared out of the clouds and attempted to attack the Stormoviks just as they were diving at the landing-craft.

A dog-fight ensued that even Lunin with all his experience was unable to follow. The six Soviet fighters covering the Stormoviks became tangled up in a ball with the Messerschmitts. But half a minute later the tangle fell apart. Three Messerschmitts dropped out of it and crashed into the lake amid the swerving barges. The rest darted away and made for the clouds.

Lunin, who had not taken part in the fight, suddenly spotted a Messerschmitt skimming away across the waves. He and Tatarenko dashed after it. The German pilot realized at once that he was being pursued and tried to squeeze the last ounce of speed out of his machine. But the new Soviet planes had greater speed. The distance between the Messerschmitt and its pursuers grew steadily less,

and Lunin, with his thumbs on the trigger button, felt his heart thump joyfully as the Messerschmitt swelled in his sights.

Realizing that he was losing the race, the German jerked back his stick and went up in a vertical climb. In the vertical plane the Germans were used to having the advantage of speed and manoeuvrability over the aircraft they were usually called upon to fight. But without the slightest lag Lunin's aircraft zoomed up after the Messerschmitt at the same angle. They plunged into the clouds almost simultaneously.

In the clouds Lunin immediately lost sight of his quarry. His plane was swaddled in thick muddy fog. But he went on climbing at the same angle and the same speed. He had little hope of seeing the Messerschmitt again but in the heat of the chase he did not want to give up, especially as a general lightening of the mist indicated that the cloud bank was not so thick after all.

A sudden dazzling blaze of light made him close his eyes for a moment. He saw the sun and the pale blue sky above him, and under his wing-tips, an endless rolling ocean of clouds.

Where was the Messerschmitt?

Lunin scanned the great sweep of sky around him without seeing a single aircraft.

And suddenly the Messerschmitt popped up out of the clouds like a cork—about fifty yards from Lunin.

Lunin realized that his new aircraft had climbed quicker than the Messerschmitt and overtaken it.

Lunin dived out of the sun and after a short burst the Messerschmitt turned over and dropped first into the cloud, then into the water.

As he came down over the lake Lunin joined up again with Tatarenko, whom he had lost in the clouds. The air over the lake was deserted; no Stormoviks, no fighters. While Lunin had been pursuing the Messerschmitt the Stormoviks had completed their attack and withdrawn.

Lunin and Tatarenko dashed away to catch up with the Stormoviks. They roared over Sukho Island, over the lighthouse. The smoke of the fires, which had grown even thicker, enveloped everything and they did not see the enemy soldiers steering shorewards in their rubber boats. Neither did they see that some of the enemy had already reached the shallows, jumped out of their boats and were wading up the beaches.

7

By this time the position of the defenders was desperate. Half of their number had been killed and those who were alive were nearly all wounded. Only about ten or twelve men could still walk, but most of these were wounded too. A shell had crippled one more of the guns—Ulichev's—and only Baskakov's gun was still firing.

The Stormoviks had rounded up the enemy ships in a bunch, they had set fire to a launch and sunk one of the barges, killing and wounding many German soldiers. But no sooner had they withdrawn than the landing barges resumed their former positions and the landing began.

A sandbank prevented the barges from reaching the beaches and the landing parties advanced to the island in inflated rubber boats. Crowded with German soldiers, these boats were slow, clumsy, and unsteady. A shell from Baskakov's gun landed on one of them, destroying the boat and everyone in it. But the others continued their advance on the island. About fifty paces from the shore it was shallow enough for the soldiers to jump out. Up to their chests in water, they waded to the shore, firing wildly from submachine-guns.

The enemy gunners had to cease fire to avoid hitting their own men.

Now the island's defenders took up their positions among the rocks and prepared to repel the assault.

On the island there were two machine-guns. One of them Gusev had stationed on the high ground at the foot of the lighthouse, the other was posted among the ruins of Pugach's shattered gun emplacement. This enabled the defenders to keep nearly the whole stretch of shallow water in front of the island under machine-gun fire. Baskakov's gun continued to pound the rubber boats that were still being launched from the barges. From behind the breastworks of all three gun emplacements the Red Navy men kept up a steady fire with rifles and sub-machine-guns at the advancing Germans.

One enemy soldier after the other stumbled and disappeared under the water, never to rise again. But there were too many of them and still more came on to replace those that were killed. The German sergeant-majors could be seen pushing their men out of the rubber boats into the water, and the sound of their curses reached the island above the noise of the wind and the crackle of firing. As soon as they got into the water, the soldiers strove to reach the shore as quickly as possible because there were big rocks on the beach that would provide cover. Those who managed to reach the beach concealed themselves among the rocks, out of range of the defenders' bullets. Sheltered by the cliffs they prepared for the assault.

Senior Lieutenant Gusev suddenly raised himself and everyone saw his pale gaunt face.

"Friends!" he shouted. "Stand to the last man! Help is on the way!"

As he shouted, he threw out his arms and fell face downwards.

He had been wounded for the third time.

Sashka Stroganov ran over to him, lifted him up and turned him over. Gusev's eyes were closed. But he was breathing, he was still alive. Sashka heaved him on to his back and crawled to the dug-out. As he did so, he heard

Sergeant-Major Martynov shout: "Obey my command! For the Motherland! Forward!"

Martynov took over command of the garrison and led them in a charge to forestall the Germans and push them into the water.

Everyone except the machine-gunners followed him—all in all about ten men.

When he reached the shore, Martynov threw a hand-grenade at the soldiers concealed under the cliffs. The grenade exploded. But the next moment the Germans appeared on the cliffs charging towards Martynov.

They were led by an officer waving his revolver. Martynov went forward and ran the officer through with his bayonet, leaping over him as he fell. Several German soldiers were also killed by bayonet thrusts and the rest, collapsing before the Red Navy men's charge, wavered and jumped back down the cliffs.

Martynov and Poleshchuk threw two grenades after them and as soon as they exploded jumped down themselves. The sailors followed them and after a short skirmish the few Germans who were left alive fled into the water, trying to reach their rubber boats.

It was a triumph for the garrison. Not a single enemy soldier was left alive on the island.

But the triumph was short-lived. More and more soldiers were pushed out of the rubber boats into the water. They made their way to the island firing from submachine-guns.

One of the sailors cried out and dropped down among the rocks. Martynov bent over him. He was dead. And at that moment Martynov himself, struck by a bullet, collapsed on the body of the dead sailor.

Obviously they could not stay on the beach any longer unless they wanted to be mown down. They left the beach and returned to the shelter of the gun emplacements on top of the cliff.

Now the command of the garrison was taken over by

Poleshchuk, the Party organizer. He did not even have to announce it; he just began giving orders and everyone obeyed him. Sergeant-Major Martynov was alive but seriously wounded. Ulichev carried him up from the beach and laid him down at his side. Martynov, so big and strong, was in great pain, his incoherent phrases were punctuated with loud groans. Poleshchuk caught sight of Sashka Stroganov, who had just taken Gusev to the dug-out, and ordered him to take Martynov there too. So Sashka got the job of carrying off his wounded commanders. He heaved Martynov on to his back and crawled.

Meanwhile the German soldiers had again assembled among the rocks at the foot of the cliff. They were preparing for another assault and, to forestall them, Poleshchuk led a fresh charge. The defenders threw grenades down on the landing party and would probably have cleared the beach once again had not Poleshchuk noticed that this time another group of German soldiers had succeeded in reaching the beach some distance to the left of the place where the present skirmish was being fought. It was impossible with such a small handful of men to guard the whole shore-line of the island. They were threatened with encirclement. If the Germans cut them off from the breastworks, from the lighthouse, and the dug-out—it would be all over.

And so again the defenders of the island retreated. Poleshchuk led them first to Ulichev's shattered gun, then even farther back, to the well-preserved breastwork round Baskakov's emplacement.

The artillery fire had ceased but there was no silence. The air was full of the deafening rattle of machine-guns and tommy-guns, and the spasmodic crackle of rifle fire. Dragging Martynov on his back, Sashka crawled by a roundabout way, sheltering from bullets in hollows and behind rocks. Above the din of shooting and the noise of

the wind he heard the sound of voices, shouts. Sashka crawled forward cautiously, pausing frequently and lying still. At last he saw a broad cleft in the rocks—the entrance to the dug-out.

Among the rocks on the other side of the cleft he noticed something grey that moved.

What was it?

Germans. Two, apparently. Like Sashka, they were crawling among the rocks to avoid being hit by the flying bullets. They were just by the dug-out! What could he do with Martynov? How could he let them reach the dug-out where Gusev lay wounded, where there were so many wounded?

Sashka lay still and watched the two Germans. They appeared not to have seen him. Where were they making for? Perhaps they would crawl past without seeing the dug-out. No, the entrance was too noticeable. One was already at the edge of the cleft, looking down. He had beckoned the other and was showing him the door. They were discussing what to do next. Now they were getting up....

Sashka struggled out from under Martynov's heavy body, jumped to his feet and flung a grenade.

The Germans fell. One slithered down into the cleft and lay face downwards on the duck-boards right in front of the entrance, his helmeted head tucked under his chest at an unnatural angle. The other lay still only for a second, then jumped up and, bending low, dashed away.

Sashka went down into the dug-out. He had to step over the dead German. The German had got himself very wet while crossing to the island, water was still dripping from his greatcoat. The lamp in the dug-out was nearly out, it had run out of kerosene. Sashka put Martynov down beside Gusev; he was still groaning but had not recovered consciousness. Gusev lay still, he seemed to be asleep. Was he still alive?

In the corner of the dug-out there was a box of gren-

ades. Sashka bent over the box and started pushing grenades into his pockets, the front of his tunic, and his belt. He came out of the dug-out well loaded. As he stepped over the dead German in the wet greatcoat, he stopped to listen.

The firing was still going on and had become louder than before. But now it all seemed to be concentrated in one part of the island, somewhere on the left. From the cleft in the rock there was no one to be seen. But Sashka could hear strange voices shouting in a foreign tongue quite near by, almost beside him.

Sashka peeped out cautiously. A yard in front of his face stood a pair of wet boots. There were Germans everywhere, from the shore right up to the lighthouse. They were lying flat behind rocks, their legs stretched out towards the dug-out, firing with submachine-guns at Baskakov's gun emplacement.

The tiny handful of Red Navy men could not defend the whole island and Poleshchuk had led them into the emplacement that was least damaged. They were returning the enemy fire, but the Germans already felt themselves masters of the island and were closing in for the hill.

The weak spot in the defence of this gun emplacement was its proximity to the pit that had been used as an ammunition dump. From the pit to the breastwork it was only a few yards and the pit provided excellent cover from the defenders' bullets. The Germans had realized this and were trying to reach the pit.

Poleshchuk knew what they intended, of course, and he kept the area round the pit under fire. But there was a big rock on the edge of the pit, and this rock gave the enemy soldiers enough cover to crawl to the edge of the pit, seize their chance, and jump in. It was a slow method but the only sure one. More and more Germans gathered at the bottom of the pit and Poleshchuk could do nothing to prevent them.

Sashka Stroganov's action came off quite by chance. He had no plan. It was not he who attacked the Germans, it was the Germans who attacked him. One of them happened to look round and noticed Sashka's head in its white sailor's cap sticking out of the dug-out. The German fired, Sashka ducked down and bullets whistled over his head with an ugly whine. Sashka's lips turned blue with frenzy and he began to pick up grenades and throw them one after the other. The thunder of the explosions rolled over the island.

Waving a grenade, Sashka dashed forward. Dead Germans lay all round. Sashka tripped over their bodies and jumped over them as he ran. The survivors, stunned by this unexpected attack from the rear, took to their heels. Roused by his success, Sashka chased after them, shouting and throwing grenades.

For a whole year Senior Lieutenant Gusev had taught him the science of throwing grenades and now his training stood him in good stead. A few leaps took him to the edge of the pit, he sprang on to the big rock and glanced down. Seeing the Germans in the pit, he threw his last two grenades.

Even if a whole box of grenades had blown up at once, they would not have made such an explosion. It was not only Sashka's two grenades that exploded; all the ammunition that had been stored there went up with them.

The explosion was bigger than anything that had been heard on the island since the start of the battle. Not a single person in the pit survived. The blast tore Sashka off the rock and tossed him about three yards away.

But he did not lose consciousness at once. He heard the sound of running feet and shouts, and as he raised his head he saw the Red Navy men charging forwards. Poleshchuk had taken advantage of the explosion in the pit to make a counter-attack.

It was the third, and last, attack made by the defenders of the island. They ran in a short line—about eight or

nine men—firing with tommy-guns and rifles and throwing grenades. Poleshchuk was at their head. Shorter than the others, he seemed to roll like a ball among the rocks, ever farther and farther forward. The Germans fled and the Soviet garrison again succeeded in clearing nearly the whole island. Already the entrance to the dug-out and Ulichev's gun were far behind them. Forward, forward! The Germans were right on the edge, beyond Pugach's upturned gun.

But the success was short-lived, almost momentary. There were very many Germans on the island. They overcame their panic and again they began to crawl forward on all sides, firing with their submachine-guns. Poleshchuk's detachment, still fewer in number, again retreated to Baskakov's gun emplacement and the shelter of the breastworks.

8

It was Lunin who had the best view of what was happening, for he saw it from above, from the air, and was able to observe not individual details but the whole scene of battle.

At the head of his squadron he flew back and forth between Sukho Island and the mainland. His squadron escorted wave after wave of Stormoviks and bombers to attack the enemy ships that were clustered round the island. They struck blow after blow at the landing barges and the launches protecting them. Every wave contained more aircraft than the last, and every blow was more powerful.

The Soviet air forces over Sukho Island grew continuously. And on that sombre autumn day the German airforce suddenly found itself completely powerless. The German pilots were obviously afraid of the new Soviet fighters. The Junkers vanished and did not reappear for

a long time, and although the Messerschmitts disclosed their presence now and then by diving out of the clouds, they did not even attempt to protect the ships from the bombing.

The bombers sank yet another self-propelled barge and set fire to a launch. There was something particularly ominous about the way the launch blazed. In the grey daylight the low yellow flames licking round it seemed very bright. Ammunition stores were blowing up on the burning launch and at every explosion it shuddered painfully, like a live thing. Its engine kept working for a long time and, still blazing, it charged about among the other ships, which shied away from it in horror.

In their attempt to seize the island the Germans had suffered huge and quite unexpected losses. Many of their ships had been sunk, their dead were strewn along the rocky shore, corpses drifted past on the waves. And yet the little island with the lighthouse was still not captured, the little group of sailors was still firing back, forcing the Germans to delay and thus exposing their ships to the danger of an attack from the main forces of the Ladoga flotilla.

On its third flight to the island Lunin's squadron overtook a column of naval craft. It was a force of gun-boats, the biggest ships of the Ladoga flotilla. Still nearer the island Lunin sighted a large group of "sea-hunters," ploughing through the waves at full speed. Soviet armoured launches were approaching simultaneously from another direction.

The "sea-hunters" spread out in a chain and swung round the enemy force on the north, on the open side of the lake. The manoeuvre was noticed at once by the Germans and they showed considerable alarm, for now their line of retreat was threatened.

The German launches, whose duty it was to protect the landing barges, abandoned them and sped away to the north to protect their escape route. The barges could

not follow them because they could not leave the landing party on the island, which was still fighting Poleshchuk's detachment. Thus began the division of the enemy force into two groups, which was later to have a telling effect on the course of the action.

Again the Junkers appeared. Realizing the danger that threatened the landing force, the German command had sent them to bomb the Soviet ships. The Messerschmitts also became far more numerous, diving suddenly out of the clouds to attack the Soviet aircraft by surprise. But the number of Soviet aircraft increased at a speed that amazed Lunin. Never throughout the war had he seen so many Soviet aircraft at one time. Stormoviks, torpedo-carriers, bombers, fighters. Only now, only in this battle was Lunin able to appreciate the immensity of the changes that had recently taken place in Soviet air strength.

The Junkers did not succeed in dropping a single bomb on the Soviet ships. The Messerschmitts failed to shoot down a single Soviet aircraft. In the air battle that flared up over the lake, the German air force suffered utter defeat. With his own eyes Lunin saw Soviet fighters shoot down four German aircraft in the first few minutes—three Junkers and one Messerschmitt. In the same few minutes, Lunin himself with Tatarenko's help shot down a second Messerschmitt.

Meanwhile the gun-boats had reached the island. They closed in on the barges, meeting scarcely any resistance, for the German launches were still engaging the Soviet "sea-hunters" and armoured launches far away on the horizon. The gun-boats lined up and gave the landing barges the full weight of their heavy guns.

That was too much for the Germans; they fled in disorder.

The first to flee were the soldiers on the island. Having captured practically the whole island, they abandoned their siege of the little handful of Red Navy men and rushed panic-stricken into the cold October water, trying

to gain their rubber boats and barges. No order for retreat was heard. Probably they acted without any orders, realizing that the barges were about to leave. Afraid that they would be left alone on the island, cut off and without any support, they threw themselves into the water to escape.

The only battery commander who was still conscious was Ulichev, but he too, wounded for the fourth time, lay bleeding on the rocks and could not raise himself. Yet the only surviving gun on the island again opened fire on the enemy ships. It was manned by Poleshchuk with Sashka Stroganov helping him.

The explosion in the pit had hurled Sashka off the rock; he had struck his head and fainted. When the defenders had retired to the shelter of the breastworks after their charge, Poleshchuk had noticed him stirring and dragged him by the legs into the gun emplacement. There Sashka recovered his senses completely. There was a huge bruise on his forehead and his right eye was so swollen that he could scarcely open it, but his left still kept a lively watch on the world.

Poleshchuk was wounded in the leg. He hopped about on one leg, grabbing at the breastworks and the gun for support. When the Germans scattered away from the breastworks in their retreat from the island, he looked round at his comrades, wondering who could help him. They were all wounded, but some of them were still firing with their tommy-guns at the fleeing Germans. No, he could not rely on the wounded, they were too weak. Poleshchuk noticed Sashka's open left eye and asked:

"Can you stand up?"

"Yes," said Sashka.

And he did.

"Give me a shell!"

And so the gun spoke again.

Suddenly Poleshchuk shouted: "Look, Sashka! Do you see?"

He pointed to the next gun emplacement where Ulichev's damaged gun was lying.

"I see," Sashka replied.

Nearly all the Germans had left the island, but a few soldiers were still moving about round Ulichev's gun.

"What are they doing?" Sashka asked.

"Laying a charge," said Poleshchuk. "They want to blow up the gun so that we shan't be able to repair it."

The Germans ran out of the emplacement and dashed away, bending low. Poleshchuk grabbed a tommy-gun and fired after them. But they managed to jump down the cliff to the rocks on the beach.

Sashka noticed a faint wisp of smoke curling up from Ulichev's gun.

"That's the fuse burning," he said. "Now there'll be a bang!"

Poleshchuk grabbed the breastwork and pulled his stumpy body over it. He limped heavily towards Ulichev's gun. His wounded leg dragged behind him.

"Where are you going?" Sashka shouted in surprise. "Stop! You'll get blown up."

But Poleshchuk waved him aside and limped on. The next moment, however, he stumbled and fell.

Then Sashka realized what Poleshchuk wanted to do.

"I'm coming," he shouted. "I'll do it!"

With a leap he was over the breastwork and running towards Ulichev's gun.

"It's too late," Poleshchuk shouted after him. "Come back! Lie flat!"

But Sashka did not listen.

He made it.

But only just in time. He tore out the fuse just before it burned to the end, and dug the charge out from under the gun.

The landing barges abandoned Sukho Island amid a devastating rain of shells. The enemy launches were far away ahead. They were retreating to the north-west in constant battle with the Soviet armoured launches that were pursuing them. This was the beginning of the rout of the whole enemy squadron. Having achieved nothing, suffering heavy losses, badly defeated, it was now retreating in the vain hope of avoiding complete destruction.

But destruction was inevitable. The German ships were faced with a long voyage right across the lake to their base, the port of Keksgolm captured by the Finnish troops. Only there could they take refuge. And the whole voyage was to be spent under the bombs of Soviet aircraft and the constant artillery fire of Soviet ships.

Lunin witnessed the retreat of the German ships from start to finish. His squadron spent the whole day in the air, escorting wave after wave of bombers over their targets. Occasionally they fought brief skirmishes with the Messerschmitts, in which the Germans were always defeated. And meanwhile the bombers struck again and again at the retreating ships, encountering scarcely any resistance.

Having split up into two groups at Sukho Island, the German force crossed the whole lake in two groups. Their first group, consisting of the launches, was pursued by the Soviet armoured launches and "sea-hunters." The armoured launches, small, agile, splendidly armed, fast, invulnerable, and fearless, wrought havoc among the Germans. They attacked continuously all the way to Keksgolm, and the German launches, their numbers growing less and less, dragged their way across the lake, snapping back exhaustedly.

And way back in the rear, lagging farther and farther behind, came the landing barges with the troops, and their position was even worse. They were pursued by another force of "sea-hunters" and the gun-boats. The barges tried

to keep the Soviet ships at a distance with the fire from their guns. But the gun-boats closed in on them under cover of smoke-screens laid by the fast and manoeuvrable "sea-hunters," battering them with their heavy guns at almost point-blank range. The Soviet ships pursued the enemy, fighting them constantly with many types of weapon; it was a process of gradual extermination. And above the wavering, thinning line of enemy ships flew Soviet aircraft, bombing and strafing.

The short autumn day ended early. Darkness descended over the lake, and all the way from Sukho Island to Keksgolm glowed the bright fires of sinking German ships.

That evening, when the exhausted pilots gathered in the mess for supper, their eyes were still aglow with the reflection of those fires. They could scarcely speak from weariness, their hands were numb, they could hardly move their legs, but they were all filled with the profound joy of victory.

"If only *they* could have seen that!" Lunin burst out suddenly as he sat down at table.

Kostin missed the point, "Who do you mean, Comrade Guards Major?"

Tatarenko shot an angry glance at Kostin. Couldn't he use his brains? He himself had realized at once that Lunin had been thinking of Rassokhin and the pilots of his squadron.

9

The mine-sweeper ТЩ-100, which had been the first to engage the enemy, did not take part in the pursuit. She had been holed in two more places and lost the ability to move fast. She was still thoroughly seaworthy, however, and all her crew were safe. Senior Lieutenant Kargin was ordered to proceed to Sukho Island and take off the wounded.

By that time all the other ships had dropped below the horizon. The lake all round was deserted, except for a half-sunken barge that was still burning out, and the hulks of barges and launches with the waves breaking over them. Kargin steered ТЩ-100 as close to the island as possible, then ordered a boat to be lowered. Doctor Bernadsky and two sailors went aboard it.

Doctor Bernadsky was an awkward young fellow with a large head, fleshy nose, and soft, kindly lips. He had served in the fleet for over a year but there was nothing seamanlike or military in his clumsy figure. In spite of all Kargin's efforts to make a sailor out of him, he still looked a landlubber, and his greatcoat hung on him like a doctor's gown.

The ship's boat bobbed over the waves towards the island. Clutching his bag of medical supplies, the doctor stared at the island in surprise.

What struck him most was its immobility. The column of smoke rising from the still smouldering hut at the foot of the lighthouse was the only thing that moved, all the rest was motionless. A jumbled heap of rocks, ruined fortifications. Not a soul about.

Where were the defenders?

As the nose of the boat scraped up the pebbly beach Bernadsky saw the corpses. Corpses everywhere, on the rocks and between the rocks, at the water's edge and higher up, on the cliffs. Only Germans. Jumping out of the boat, Bernadsky and his assistants climbed up a path towards the lighthouse. Here, too, there were many corpses, but still only Germans. They had paid dearly for their attempt to take the island.

"Here are some of ours," said one of the sailors, who was in front.

He bent down over two Red Navy men lying beside a shell-torn breastwork.

"Wounded?" Bernadsky asked going up to him.

But the other shook his head: both men were dead.

There must be somebody alive on the island. Shell-craters, shrapnel.... Empty cartridge cases scattered everywhere, broken fragments of rock. Three guns: one knocked over and smashed, another merely knocked over, a third that looked as if it was still in order. Not so long ago it had fired at the retreating enemy ships, everyone on the mine-sweeper had heard it. But who had manned it? Yes, there must be someone still alive.

Suddenly, in one of the hollows that they had taken for a shell-crater, something stirred and a young Red Navy man with a huge bruise over his swollen eye stood up.

It was Sashka Stroganov.

"It's a good thing you came," he said, raising his hand to his cap. "I couldn't do anything by myself."

"By yourself?" Bernadsky repeated. "What about the others? Are they all dead?"

"No, not all of them. There are some wounded."

"Are you the only one not wounded?"

"Yes."

"What about your commander?"

"The senior lieutenant is alive, he opened his eyes a moment ago and said something. Then he started wandering again. A lot of them are wandering. They all keep asking for water. Poleshchuk sent me to get some."

An empty pail stood at Sashka's feet.

"But where are they?" Bernadsky asked impatiently.

"Here, in the dug-out."

Bernadsky glanced into the cleft in the rocks from which Sashka had appeared, and noticed a wooden door. His pail clanking, Sashka ran down to the beach for water, while the doctor and his assistants entered the dug-out.

There turned out to be fifteen wounded, most of them in a very serious condition.

Bernadsky and his assistants were faced with a difficult task. They had only Sashka Stroganov and Poleshchuk to help them. Poleshchuk, however, turned out to be an excellent nurse; he hopped about round the bunks on one

foot and would not consent to show Bernadsky his leg until all the wounded had been examined and bandaged.

Two men died before their wounds could be dressed. Sergeant-Major Martynov was also in a very bad state, he groaned and tossed in delirium. Seaman Gunner Ulichev was seriously wounded too. He had not lost consciousness and was in great pain, but like Poleshchuk, he insisted that the others should be attended to first. When at length Bernadsky began to rip the blood-encrusted clothing off his wounds, he did not utter a sound in spite of the agonizing pain.

Senior Lieutenant Gusev kept coming to himself and fainting again. But even when conscious, he did not seem to understand quite clearly where he was and what was happening to him. He eyed the strange doctor's fleshy face with suspicion and continually asked for Sashka Stroganov and Poleshchuk.

Sashka did not leave his side, but although he would not let him go away, Gusev spoke only to Poleshchuk.

"You there, Poleshchuk?" he would ask every minute.

"Yes, here I am, Comrade Senior Lieutenant."

"Poleshchuk! I was right when I said a gunner ought to be able to throw grenades, wasn't I?"

"Yes, you were, Comrade Senior Lieutenant."

Gusev was very agitated and could not compose himself. His eyes gleamed brightly in his pale face. Usually so reticent, he now talked all the time. Sometimes he imagined he was still commanding the battle, and he would give orders, demand shells, and shout: "Fire!" But in the moments when his mind cleared, he would turn to Poleshchuk and discuss the battle:

"They thought they were stronger because there were more of them. But it doesn't work out like that, does it, Poleshchuk?"

"You're right, it doesn't, Comrade Senior Lieutenant."

Gusev laughed.

"They thought we were like them! How can they under-

stand what we're fighting for? How can you expect them to? That so, Poleshchuk?"

"Yes, that's it."

"They thought they could crush us with iron, but we're tougher than iron. That so, Poleshchuk?"

"Yes, yes, that's so."

When Gusev was carried out of the dug-out on a stretcher and he realized that he was going to be taken away from the island, he seemed downcast. The part of his life that he had spent here, among these bare rocks, meant so much to him. Turning his pale face, he eagerly surveyed the old tower of the lighthouse, the brick chimney of the burnt hut in which he had lived, the shell-torn breastworks, the rocky soil scattered with twisted metal, the sea-gulls circling above the waves. Here he, the commandant of this little island, had worked, dreamed, taught, studied, fought, and won. As he looked about him, he seemed to want to take the island with him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Work and Dreams

1

On the first of December Lunin received a letter.

This was something quite out of the ordinary. It was common knowledge in the regiment that the commander of Two Squadron never got any letters. There were many different conjectures made on the subject—in the dug-outs where the mechanics lived, in the pilots' cabins,

at the squadron command posts and in both messes, the officers' and the men's. And now, at last, out of the blue, there arrived a sheet of copy-book paper folded into a triangular envelope and addressed to Konstantin Ignatyevich Lunin.

Before it reached Lunin's hands the letter went the round of the whole regiment where it aroused general curiosity. First, it was brought to the cottage outside which the forked birch-tree grew. Lunin was not in, but Regiment Engineer Fyodorov was—he sometimes dropped in after lunch for half-an-hour's quiet nap on Lunin's bed. Taking the letter he held it up to his eyes, turned it over, examined all the postmarks carefully. Giving up the idea of resting he pulled on his boots and at once set off for the command post of Two Squadron, where he hoped to catch Lunin.

But Lunin was not there either, though Kuznetsov and Khametov were. Khametov took the letter from the engineer and with an expression that was full of meaning showed it to Kuznetsov.

"The major is probably still at lunch," said Kuznetsov and told Khromykh to take the letter to the air-crew mess at once.

But Lunin was not in the mess. Lunch, however, was still in progress and there were a good many pilots from all three squadrons at table. The arrival of Khromykh with a letter for Lunin made a great impression on everyone. Voices rose at various tables to say that Major Lunin accompanied by Yermakov and Proskuryakov had left for the regiment command post ten minutes previously. There were many offers to run there and deliver the letter immediately. Khromykh, however, was not at all prepared to dispense with that pleasure. Grasping the letter firmly in his great fist he strode off to the regiment command post.

In the dug-out of the regiment command post Proskuryakov, Yermakov, Shakhbazyan, Lunin and Tararaksin were examining a large map that lay spread on the desk.

It was a map of the Stalingrad Region, the map which Shakhbazyan, the owner of many maps, now specially prized. Every day he marked on it all he could find out from the communiqués of the Soviet Information Bureau about the encirclement of the German armies at Stalingrad. He marked the line of the ever-changing front with various coloured crayons; the direction of the blows he indicated with arrows. His map was a miracle of clarity and everyone in the regiment longed to look at it.

Everyone present took part in the ceremony of handing the letter to Lunin.

"A letter for you, Comrade Guards Major."

"Here's a letter, Major."

"Konstantin Ignatyevich, you've got a letter."

They watched Lunin's face with curiosity. Everybody noticed how pale he had grown. The hand he held out for the letter shook a little. He examined the letter on one side, then on the other, as if he could not make up his mind to open it. However, noticing that all eyes were on him, he pulled himself together and opened the envelope.

Before he had finished reading the first two or three lines the colour rushed to his pale face.

"It's from Serov," he said. "From our Kolya."

His eyes glittered with joy.

"What, really?" exclaimed Proskuryakov in his deep bass. "So he's alive."

Since Serov had been taken away not a word had reached them about him and they had begun to wonder whether he was alive or not.

"What does he write?"

"Where is he?"

The letter, written in Serov's big uneven hand, was brief and provided little information. Serov explained his long silence by the fact that he had at one time lost all hope of ever getting back to the regiment. "Only now is there a hope that I'll make it," he wrote. "If not as a pilot then as a clerk in the clothing stores. I'm in hospital at Barnaul,

three thousand miles from the front. Actually I'm almost fit, but there's a bit of nonsense left which is still keeping me here. . . ."

Further on, Serov asked Lunin to write to him about everything that was happening in the regiment and also to give his greetings to the commander, the commissar and to everybody else, to everybody who still remembered him. The letter ended on a rather sad note. "You and I are both bachelors," Serov wrote, "and you must understand that for me the regiment is my only real home." Under the signature he had written in tiny letters: "If there's a letter for me, please forward it."

Everyone at once realized from whom Serov was expecting a letter.

"He'll have to wait till doomsday for that letter," said Proskuryakov grimly.

The regiment firmly believed that the woman Serov was in love with before the war had deliberately jilted him. And because they were fond of Serov they all damned her mercilessly.

"Better she doesn't write," said Shakhbazyan. "That's one way of letting him know her feelings, at least. He'll feel it for a bit and then find another. A woman like that's not worthy of him."

"To hell with her," said Tararaksin. "The main thing is he's alive and recovering."

Tararaksin's kindly short-sighted eyes shone with joy behind his glasses. He loved Serov.

"You write to him that we're all waiting for him, Konstantin Ignatyevich," said Yermakov. "Why, I'll write to him myself."

In less than half an hour the joyful news that a letter had come from Serov ran round the whole regiment. Khromykh, striding beside Lunin to the squadron command post, smiled and kept on saying:

"So our senior lieutenant is alive. Well, well. . . . And

there was I thinking I'd never hear anything more about him.... So he's alive."

To the young pilots of Two Squadron, the news that Serov, one of the legendary "Rassokhin's men," was alive and that he might soon come back to the regiment to fly with them was like the announcement of a miracle. On the airfield beside the planes, in the mess, in their cabin in the evenings they spoke incessantly of Serov's impending return. They stole friendly, meaningful looks at Lunin—from their own experience they knew what a front-line friendship meant, and they understood how he must be feeling.

But it was Dr. Gromeko who was delighted most by the news of Serov's recovery. He, no doubt, had worried much about Serov and had not felt at all sure of what had happened to him. Now, when it was clear that his patient was on the road to recovery he was filled with pride.

"Didn't I tell you there was no need to amputate his arm?" he cried when he met Lunin in the mess. "Any fool can amputate, it's the easiest thing in the world."

But, drawing closer to Lunin, he asked him in a low, cautious voice: "D'you think he wrote the letter himself? Maybe he dictated it to somebody."

"No," Lunin replied, "he wrote it himself, I know his handwriting."

"I see," said the doctor with relief. "Of course, he may have learned to write with his left hand. What do you think?"

After supper Lunin walked back to the cottage in order to reply to Serov in peace and quiet. Slava was calmly snoring in his bed. Lunin placed the lamp on the table, took a sheet of paper and the inkstand and sat pondering for a long time.

There was so much that he wanted to tell Serov that he did not know where to make a start. The more he thought, the clearer he saw that even if he wrote for a whole month he would never manage to tell Serov everything. At last

he decided to write that the regiment was longing to see him again, that everybody wished him good health, and that there was no letter for him. What else? He thought a little and then enquired whether Serov wanted him to send his suitcase to Barnaul.

The letter turned out quite short. Lunin read it through, sighed, and folded the sheet into an envelope.

2

On the following day Uvarov arrived in his U-2.

He entered the dug-out of the regiment command post just as everybody had assembled there to pore over Shakhbazyan's map again. Proskuryakov called them to attention and everybody sprang to his feet. Uvarov took the report, shook hands all round and then walked over to the unrolled map which covered the whole of the desk of the chief of staff.

"We ought to be sitting over the map of Leningrad, Comrade Division Commissar," said Shakhbazyan with a guilty smile. "And here we are looking at Stalingrad."

"Quite right," said Uvarov. "You deserve to be envied, having a map like that. I have one like it myself, by the way, and I can't tear my eyes from it. The fate of Leningrad is now being decided at Stalingrad."

As was his wont, Uvarov, before announcing the reason for his visit, made an unhurried tour of the whole regiment, calling at each dug-out in turn and speaking to many people. He attended two Komsomol meetings—in One and Three Squadrons—where he cracked a good many jokes and laughed a lot with the young fitters. He had lunch in the mess with all the air crews; he did not have much to say during the meal, he did more listening; but many people noticed that his face wore an unusual look—he seemed resolute and pleased. It was clear that he had brought some news with him.

After lunch he called a squadron leaders' conference at the regiment command post. Here, over Shakhbazyan's map of Stalingrad, Uvarov finally told them why he had come. The regiment was to be immediately transferred.

"Back across the lake?" asked Yermakov.

Uvarov nodded.

"The time's come to go west, not east," he said significantly.

For some moments there was general silence. Everyone felt the importance of this news. In their heart of hearts they had long been expecting something like this to happen. The daily communiqués about the Stalingrad fighting had raised their hopes and heightened their impatience. Some great events were drawing nigh, some change which, it might be, would decide, at long last, the fate of Leningrad, of Ladoga, of the Baltic Fleet.

The aircraft had to take off early the next morning, under cover of the semi-darkness just before sunrise so as not to draw the enemy's attention to the move. The ground staff of the regiment would have to cross the lake some time earlier—during the night, in the darkest, quietest hours—using transport aircraft which would arrive for them at 24.00 hours precisely. They would have to start making arrangements to leave right away; there was no time to spare.

Lunin was in a hurry to get to his squadron. A lot of work lay ahead of him. He was one of the first to leave the dug-out. Uvarov followed on his heels.

"Are you in a hurry? You'll have time. Keep me company for a little. I've promised to drop in on the anti-aircraft crew. They're expecting me."

It was not yet five o'clock but already quite dark. Under the thin cover of snow their feet could feel the frozen earth at every pace.

An unusual silence reigned all around; a silence broken only by the faintest of sounds, coming from far, far away. It was difficult to say whether it was the mutter of the

front or simply the murmur of the forest veiled in darkness. Uvarov and Lunin walked side by side. They liked each other and each knew it and was glad to be with the other.

"Did Serov ask for any letters to be forwarded?" Uvarov asked.

"Yes," replied Lunin, not at all surprised that Uvarov should know about Serov's letter. "But there haven't been any."

"I know," said Uvarov. "He's still in love with her and still hoping, although eighteen months have already passed. Many people lose touch with each other these days."

"She probably doesn't want to keep in touch with him."

"That may be," said Uvarov. "All the same, I'm not at all inclined to think badly of her. I don't know her, of course, but I know Serov. He would not be attracted to anyone who wasn't a decent sort."

"A fellow can make a mistake," said Lunin.

He was thinking not only of Serov, and Uvarov noted that and kept silent.

"A fellow can make a mistake about himself," Lunin continued, "and he's even more likely to make one about somebody else."

"That's true," said Uvarov. "You can be wrong about people sometimes. All the same, it doesn't happen often. If you only knew how many times I've had to look at a man and ask myself whether I can trust him or not. You consider the matter, weigh up the pros and the cons, then suddenly you stop thinking about it and decide you can trust him. And that makes you feel good, for it's a fine thing to trust people."

"What's that you said? A fine thing to trust people?"

"Of course. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, I do. You've put it very well, Ivan Ivanovich."

"And, you know, I've hardly ever had to regret trusting someone," Uvarov went on. "Hardly ever."

"All the same, Serov may have made a mistake," Lunin persisted.

"Yes, he may have made a mistake. But we mustn't. We don't know what's happened to her, and, instead of guessing, we ought to find out. It's up to us to find her and learn why she isn't writing to him."

"That's true," Lunin assented. "It wouldn't be a bad thing to know that. How are we going to find her, though?"

"We'll have to try," said Uvarov. "I'll have a shot."

Lost in thought they walked on in silence across the dark, hushed airfield. The talk about Serov had brought them still closer together.

Nevertheless, Lunin was somewhat put out by the unexpectedness of Uvarov's next question.

"Tell me, Konstantin Ignatyevich," he said after a long pause, "why aren't you in the Party?"

Lunin took his time to answer.

"Life just turned out that way," he said.

"Badly, eh?"

"Badly? Oh no! Why, do I ever complain?"

Lunin fell silent. Uvarov, too, had nothing to say. They went on walking.

"I've long dreamed of joining the Party," Lunin said at length. "I even had my recommendations all ready once. Not very long before the war. I'd written out my application."

"What happened?"

" I didn't send it in."

"Why not?"

"Something happened. . . ."

Silence. Lunin, possibly, expected Uvarov to put another question. But Uvarov did not speak.

"I divorced my wife," Lunin said. "Did you know about that?"

"I guessed it. Was that held against you?"

"No, it wasn't. But it might have been."

"What, divorcing your wife?"

"Well, at least I might have been asked questions about it. And I didn't want to explain anything to anybody. So I didn't send in my application."

Uvarov said nothing. He was quite surprised when Lunin suddenly went on: "I turned her out of the house. She was carrying on with another man and I found out. She begged me to forgive her. Said she'd never see the fellow again. She wanted to stay. She begged very hard. . . ."

"And what did you do?"

"I turned her out. And I've never set eyes on her since."

Uvarov wondered whether Lunin would add anything. But Lunin had finished. A little later Uvarov asked: "What d'you think? Was that the right thing to have done?"

"I used to think so."

"And now?"

"I don't know."

They were again silent, nearing the anti-aircraft crew's dug-out now. Lunin had to get back to his squadron. They stopped but they were reluctant to part and stood side by side for some moments, hidden from each other by the darkness. Now that their heavy footsteps had ceased they could hear even more clearly that vague drawn-out mutter being carried from far, far away.

"D'you hear that?" Uvarov said suddenly. "That is the cry of our land, occupied by the Germans: 'I'm w-a-i-t-i-n-g, w-a-i-t-i-n-g. . . .' "

3

The three squadrons of the regiment left the station in succession, Two Squadron being the last to take off.

The long December night was quite over and the jagged outline of the trees surrounding the airfield jutted distinctly above the morning mist as, one after another, the aircraft of Two Squadron left the snow-clad field. For the

last time they dipped over Rassokhin's grave, took up a wide V-formation and headed westwards.

The sky was dull but behind, in the east, there was a gap in the clouds through which the pale winter sunrise glimmered and cast a pink reflection on the snow.

The lake stretched below like a vast, motionless desert. The year before at this time—early December—long convoys of lorries had been filing across the lake, but now the ice was still intersected by great stretches of unfrozen water, extending for many miles. The autumn had been a long one, the second winter of the war was late in coming, there had been no really hard frosts and the lake was freezing slowly and sluggishly. Navigation had been suspended long ago but it had not yet been possible to reopen the motor road across the ice. Once again Leningrad's connections with the rest of the country could be maintained only by the air-lift.

Soon the squadron sighted Cape Osinovets, covered with deep forest. There was the Osinovets Light. Lunin had flown that way the previous winter with Rassokhin and Serov. Then they were only three and they had been flying east. Rassokhin, in fact, had never got there.... And now Lunin was returning. And bringing with him so many aircraft! And what aircraft!

They landed at a different field from the one where they had been stationed in autumn 1941, and, truth to tell, Lunin was glad. He would have found it hard to move back into that bungalow where Kabankov used to play the accordion of an evening, to have to walk into the same mess where he had sat so often with Chepelkin, Serov and Rassokhin. That airfield had lain north-west of Leningrad, only a few miles from the coast of the Gulf of Finland; the new one they had been posted to lay north-east of the city. The railway line that connected Leningrad with the western shores of Lake Ladoga—the only line in operation within the ring of the siege—ran close by the airfield, and when the squadron landed, the

first earthly sound that Lunin heard was the whistle of a locomotive. It was a long time since he had heard a train whistle and that familiar, calm, business-like sound was so peaceful and homely.

Everyone expected the transfer to be followed at once by a spell of fierce fighting. But they were mistaken. Days passed and there was no fighting whatsoever. Headquarters, evidently, were solely concerned in not letting the enemy know that a whole air regiment had been flown up to Leningrad, one, moreover, equipped with many of the latest type of planes. The aircraft were carefully dispersed and camouflaged at the fringe of the woods that bordered the airfield, and were rarely taken up, and if so, always in very small numbers, two or four at a time.

During the short daylight hours Lunin took his pilots up in turn, so that they should get accustomed to the unfamiliar landscape and learn to take their bearings. With either Tatarenko or Kostin as his second he would take another pair—Karyakin and Ryabushkin, or Khametov and Dziga, or Kuznetsov and Ostrosablin. And they would set off on long flights.

Every time they took off they saw Leningrad. The outskirts of the city ran quite close to the airfield. Except for Lunin and Kuznetsov, none of the pilots in the squadron had ever been to Leningrad and they would gaze down eagerly at the famous city as they flew.

The first thing that impressed them about Leningrad was its size. It lay below them on a flat plain intersected by winding rivers, and even in clear weather and from a high altitude the eye could not take in its farthest edge. But there was little clear weather; as a rule, the gigantic city was plunged in a swirling veil of December mist on whose surface towers, spires, cupolas and chimney-stacks seemed to be floating.

The pilots would like to have flown over Leningrad but that was not their job. Taking off from the station they usually flew over the forest southwards, towards that sec-

tor of the front which ran along the banks of the Neva. When they were over the river they turned east, to port, and followed the line of the front to where the Neva flowed out of Lake Ladoga.

They observed both low wooded banks of the river. Spattered with snow the forest looked quiet and empty at first glance. Only numerous little columns of smoke rising among the trees betrayed the fact that tense activities were hidden there. As their eyes grew used to the scene, the pilots gradually began to make out camouflaged communication lines, dug-outs, shelters, batteries, complicated lines of trenches, knots and groups of blockhouses. The whole earth was honeycombed and dug and what appeared to be uninhabited forest concealed a vast number of people. The front had remained stable here for over a year, and during that time both armies had managed to put up defences of unusual strength. Their respective positions were divided only by the river. Here and there the river was streaked by channels of dark unfrozen water but every day they grew narrower and a firm bridge of ice was establishing itself more solidly between the two banks.

Flying up the Neva they reached Lake Ladoga and Shlisselburg. The German-held town lay on the south bank of the river, and opposite it, on an island divided from the town by a narrow stretch of water, loomed a dark heap of stone—all that was left of Shlisselburg Fortress, in whose gloomy dungeons the tsarist government used once to imprison revolutionaries.

Lunin had seen this place only once before—the previous winter, when he had been flying east with Rassokhin and Serov. He had looked down at Shlisselburg Fortress with curiosity, for even then he had heard stories of a party of naval gunners who had taken up their position on the island, behind the walls of the ancient fortress, barred the Germans' path across the Neva, and prevented them from linking up with the Finns advancing from the north, and thus cutting Leningrad off from Ladoga. Over

a year had passed since then, the second winter was already approaching, and still the same indomitable group of Red Navy men was lodged on the island in front of the Germans' very noses, separated from them by a strip of water that from the air looked no wider than a ditch. The Germans shelled them over open sights at a range of a hundred yards, stirring up the heap of ancient stone time and time again. But to no purpose. The Red Navy men sat in deep burrows under the stones, and when necessary, they answered the Germans' fire with guns that they could push suddenly out of these burrows.

The whole Baltic Fleet and the two northern fronts—the Leningrad and the Volkhov—listened to tales of their exploits with love and respect. And the tales were many. It was said, for instance, that at times the island had to go for weeks on end without receiving food supplies. The whole area between the island and the north bank of the river was under enemy fire and during the light summer nights it was impossible to reach the island alive. In spring, communication with the island was interrupted for a long time by the ice of Lake Ladoga drifting to the Neva. In autumn the nights were dark enough, but the thin ice could not be relied on to take the weight of a man's body. And in winter, the daring fellow who tried to crawl to or from the island could easily be spotted by the Germans against the background of white snow. The islanders lived a hungry life under the stone slabs of the ruined fortress, and in their dark burrows it was always damp and cold, for to supply the island with fuel was even more difficult than to supply it with food. The sick and wounded remained on the island with those who were fit, because they could not be evacuated. But the Germans never succeeded in breaking the will of the defenders, and the little island in the middle of the Neva remained impregnable to the last.

All this was well known to the pilots. They had also heard the story that was told of the cat who lived on the

island and endured all its hardships on equal terms with the defenders. The cat was the favourite of those heroic sailors, her eyes gleamed in the darkness of their cellar, she purred sitting in their laps, and it warmed their frozen hands to stroke her. She reminded them of comfort, of a peaceful life, of their homes. They shared with her their meagre rations and conscientiously did all they could to guard her from danger.

Keeping her safe, however, was a difficult task, for this cat was possessed of remarkable courage. She had come to the island as a kitten and her whole life had been spent amid shell bursts and machine-gun fire. She had got used to these deafening noises and ignored them completely. At the slightest rustle in some distant corner she would prick up her ears, but even if a shell burst quite near her she would go on sleeping.

Her favourite place was upstairs, on the battered stones of the ruined fortress wall. She was attracted there by the same force that attracts other cats to lofts and roofs. There she would chase the sparrows, strut about arching her back and lifting her tail, and bask in the heat of the sun. The German gunners followed her movements closely through their binoculars and range-finders. And since she was the only moving and living creature they could discover on the island, they started bombarding her with their big guns.

Whenever one of the regular bombardments started, the sailors would ask each other: "Where's the cat?" And if she was not to be found in the underground chambers of the fortress, there was always somebody daring enough to crawl outside and look for her among the broken stones. The cat was persuaded, locked up, punished, but nothing was of any avail—she would always find a loophole and escape upstairs.

And at last the Germans wounded her.

She crawled down into the cellar, streaming with blood, her hind legs paralyzed. The doctor who treated the

wounded sailors set about treating her too. He gave her an operation and removed several small splinters from her body, then bound up her wounds. For a long time she was at death's door, and the men who entered the chamber where she lay on a clean sheet spoke in whispers so as not to disturb her.

Little by little she began to recover. And on the very first day that she regained the use of her legs, she again slipped away upstairs. The German guns crashed out. This time nothing was found of the fearless cat but the tip of her tail.

Circling over the ruins of Shlisselburg Fortress the aircraft turned and took the same route over the front line back to their station. As soon as he felt the pilots had familiarized themselves with the banks of the Neva, Lunin took them beyond the river, over territory held by the enemy. Here great care and foresight were required. They rarely met Messerschmitts, and, generally speaking, the Germans had lost their grip in the air and were obviously avoiding battle; on the other hand, the flak was violent. Obviously the Germans had the entire sky divided into squares and apportioned to a very large number of anti-aircraft batteries which had excellent inter-communications and maintained an accurate fire. The exploding flak which smeared the air forced the pilots to maintain a very high altitude and to be constantly manoeuvring in and out of the clouds. This was a dangerous game and every day it kept Lunin on tenterhooks lest he should lose a plane, which meant a pilot, too, since they were behind the enemy's lines. However, headquarters had insisted on Lunin's getting his pilots fully acquainted with the country across the Neva and he stubbornly kept up these sorties, always in small groups so as not to draw undue attention to themselves.

From mid-December onwards the squadron began to receive reconnaissance tasks. Tararaksin would receive details of the operation directly from Front H.Q., a fact

which everybody in the regiment considered a great honour. Reconnaissance work required double care; it meant flying in such a way that even if the Germans spotted the plane they should be left in doubt whether it was observing a railway line or a bridge or a mobile battery. When they were reconnoitring, the planes would go out in pairs, and occasionally, to avoid attention, singly. Up to the point in which H.Q. was interested the pilot of the reconnaissance aircraft would try to make use of cloud cover. He would dart into the clear, then back into cloud, and radio everything he had observed. He was expected to provide accurate and reliable intelligence, facts which he could vouch for, and this meant checking his own observations by taking them first from one, then from another direction. Should a Messerschmitt appear or the flak grow more intense, he would take evading action, only to return a few minutes later.

The main hindrance to reconnaissance work was darkness. On the 60th parallel a day is no longer than three or four hours at the end of December. And even in those hours of daylight there is more twilight than real light. In that semi-darkness the snow-clad earth, seen from above, looks like a white field spotted with vague, dark patches of forest and built-up areas, and keen eyes are required if these patches are to be deciphered. Lunin, for instance, soon came to the conclusion that his eyes were no longer sharp enough for reccy.

At first he thought he was seeing excellently, not a jot worse than when he was young; and he frequently went out reconnoitring himself only, on return, to learn the bitter truth from Tararaksin that the intelligence he had brought back was of little interest to Front H.Q. He saw what everybody else saw, what Front H.Q. already knew without his help; and no optical aids could help him. Possibly it was not so much a matter of sight as of a lack of ability to observe or even of any gift for reconnaissance work. Anyway, Lunin very soon had to admit

that in this field he was in no state to compete with his youngsters.

All of them made better reconnaissance pilots than he, but two of them—Tatarenko and Kuznetsov—were outstanding. Not that they were equal. Kuznetsov saw things that even Tatarenko could not see. Tatarenko, proud as ever and used to being the first in everything, did not yield the honours to Kuznetsov without a contest. But it did not last long and soon Kuznetsov was acknowledged the best reconnaissance pilot in the regiment. Front H.Q. remembered his name, and every time a message came asking for a reconnaissance sortie, it was accompanied by a firm request that it be made by Junior Lieutenant Kuznetsov.

The pilots of Two Squadron were all quartered together in a warm timber-built house which they immediately referred to as their cabin. In the evening after supper they would gather there, loll on the beds, read, write letters, or play dominoes, banging the pieces down hard, "in the Navy way," on the table. The evenings were long, dark and still. A train would rumble by, bringing supplies from Ladoga's shores to Leningrad, and then a deep, toneless silence would re-establish itself—the silence of the depths of the ocean, of the earth itself.

But the pilots did not trust this silence. They sensed that something was coming and in their heart of hearts they were preparing themselves for it. They were conscious of impending battle, of changes to come, of a tremendous turning-point, and they remained on the alert, trying not to miss a single sign of its approach.

Being airmen they naturally turned their eyes first of all to what was happening in the air. What attracted their attention most of all was the marked reduction in the numbers of Messerschmitts and their reluctance to fight, as well as the absence of German bombers. Surely the Luftwaffe would not submit to the superiority of the new types of Soviet fighter-planes and abandon the air to their

opponents? Nobody believed that. What could it mean, then? What was to come next? Ought they to be on their guard?

"The Germans are still using the same fighters they started the war with," Kostin reasoned in the cabin. "Now, we've managed to change our fighters, we're using new, much better ones. There we've overtaken the Germans, our industry has gone one better than theirs, so we've got superiority. What's left for the Germans to do, if they want to go on fighting in the air? Only one thing. To produce a new fighter instead of the Messerschmitt. That's what they're doing now. We'll soon see it."

Everybody realized what new German fighter Kostin was talking about. They even knew what it was called—the Focke-Wulf-190. This aircraft had already made an appearance, though in small numbers, on some of the far-distant fronts of the south, but none had yet been seen here, near Ladoga, near Leningrad.

"What are they like? Are they more powerful than Messerschmitts?" they asked Kostin.

"Of course they are. Otherwise there'd be no point in making them."

"In what way are they more powerful, though? Are they faster? Better armed? Do they gain height quicker? Are they more manoeuvrable?"

Kostin, however, knew as little about the new German aircraft as the others and could not reply to their questions.

"What's the point of guessing?" said Tatarenko. "We'll down one and have a look at it."

"But how are you going to down it?"

"We'll find some way of doing that."

"But what will the Germans do with their Messerschmitts?" Ryabushkin asked. "Scrap them?"

"Why scrap them?" said Karyakin. "They'll send them to the west. Messerschmitts against Hurricanes will be just the job."

4

One day early in December Sonya found herself with a few hours to spare and dropped in at her flat.

She went there mainly for the sake of letters. It was a long time since she had heard from Slava and she was worried. Unless there was a letter from him now something must have happened to him.

It was one of the usual dark December days. There was a slight frost. Light powdery snow fell thinly on the paving-stones and swirled with the dust around the lamp-posts. Still in her overalls Sonya slipped on her winter coat which now barely reached her knees, she was growing so fast. The nearer she got to her home the quicker she walked. She was almost running when she reached the yard.

The yard was empty and quiet. But near the door that led to Sharapov's staircase stood a car. That must be Uvarov. She did not like calling on Sharapov when somebody else was there; she felt like an intruder. But she had to call for Slava's letter, so she went in.

There was an atmosphere of winter-time in the first room—logs were blazing in the stove. Uvarov's driver sat basking in the heat. Beads of perspiration glittered on his forehead. Sharapov was sitting in his usual place at the desk right under the black stove-pipe which carried the smoke out through the window. His face wore that concentrated, solemn, closed expression it always wore when Uvarov was about. The hum of many voices came from behind the door of Uvarov's office.

"Nothing for you," Sharapov said hastily when he saw Sonya come in.

Sonya could not believe her ears.

"What, nothing?" she asked in confusion.

"There's no letter for you," Sharapov said in a low voice, everything in his look indicating that Sonya had

come at an awkward moment and that he could not talk to her now.

But Sonya was too upset to go away before she had learned something.

"It's a month since I've heard from him. What's the matter?"

Sharapov's face softened slightly.

"There's nothing the matter," he whispered. "He's quite all right. You'll soon find out why he doesn't write."

"Has he been taken somewhere?"

"He hasn't been taken anywhere. You'll soon find out, I tell you."

"What will I find out?"

But at that moment Uvarov's voice was heard through the door:

"Sharapov!"

Waving Sonya out of the flat, Sharapov heeded Uvarov's summons.

It was clear to Sonya that she was going to get nothing more out of him. She left the flat feeling very worried, intending to come back a few hours later. When Uvarov left, Sharapov, perhaps, would become more talkative.

She crossed the deserted yard and started climbing her staircase where she knew every chip on the stairs, every stain on the walls. All looked the same as before, except that the window on the second floor landing had lost its glass. The wind blew snow-flakes through the gaping window and the whole landing was already carpeted evenly with snow. There was not a single footprint in the snow—all the flats were empty and nobody used the stairs.

She climbed to the fifth floor and slipped the latch-key into the lock. How well she knew that sound!

She opened the door and came to a sudden halt on the threshold. The light was on in the hall. The lamp burned dimly but it was definitely on.

For a second she thought there must be somebody in the flat. Then she guessed the reason. The light had come

on while she was away. It had probably been burning for days. The electricity had been cut off in Leningrad the previous winter. But during the summer and autumn some buildings received current and their number increased every week. At last the turn of their house had come.

It was still rather warm in the flat—the frosts had set in only recently and the walls were not yet frozen right through. But Sonya knew that this warmth was deceptive and that in ten minutes her hands and feet would grow chilled, so, first of all, she set the little stove going in the kitchen, the one beside which her grandad had died the previous winter. The tinder flamed at once and the stove filled the kitchen with a steady roar that sounded cosy and homely. Reflections of the flames danced on the sides of the pots and pans.

Sonya took off her coat, sat on a stool and stretched her legs towards the stove. Everything here spelled home to her. And it gave her a blissful yet at the same time poignant feeling. The dull light of the winter day filtering through the clouded window-pane, and the roar of the flames, and the ceiling, the very walls, the shabby paint on the door—everything, everything reminded her of her mother, of Grandad, of Slava.

It soon grew hot in the room. Sonya filled a large kettle and stood it on the stove so that she could launder and wash up. While waiting for the water to boil, she went into her mother's room. She meant to have a look in the wardrobe to see whether she could find something warm to put on under her overalls.

Ever since Grandad, Slava and she had moved into the kitchen—almost a year ago—she had hardly entered the other rooms in the flat. It was always dark in there: the thick black-out paper was never taken down. Bumping against chairs, Sonya passed through the dining-room and entered her mother's room. She turned on the switch and the ceiling light came on dimly and cast a yellowish uncertain glow on the walls.

Sonya's model theatre still stood on the table. There was the couch on which she had slept nearly all her life. The brass knobs on her mother's bed glittered in the same old way.

Suddenly something moved silently in a corner of the room. Sonya started. A slim boyish figure was standing there looking at her. Then Sonya recognized herself. It was her own reflection in the tall mirror.

Funny she had not recognized herself immediately. It was a long, long time since she had last looked in the tall mirror and she had quite a different picture of herself in her mind. Perhaps the poor light had something to do with it, but the girl in the mirror was not at all bad-looking. Even the overalls did not disfigure her as much as she had imagined they did. She brought her thin face nearer to the mirror and for a few moments examined her smooth forehead, the curve of her black brows and her dark eyes; it was as though she had never seen them before.

Then, turning away from the mirror, she moved to the wardrobe. Mummy's clothes hung there, and everything was so much a part of Mummy that Sonya was afraid to touch them. There was the well-worn woollen dress that Mummy usually wore about the house. To Sonya that dress was Mummy herself. And there hung the new grey costume that Mummy wore when she went off to teach at school. It had suited her so well, made her look so impressive; and she had only worn it for a few months. Beside it was Mummy's rabbit-skin winter coat and another dress, a black party frock that Mummy had worn when she went with Daddy to see the New Year in at the House of Scientists. There was a blouse, some wrappers. Mummy had hung them all up herself and they seemed to be just waiting for her to open the wardrobe and take them down.... Sonya touched none of them. She stooped and rummaged in a corner of the wardrobe for a white woollen jersey which Mummy had hardly ever worn.

One day when she felt chilled to the bone at her work in the cellar Sonya had remembered this jersey and had decided to find it. The wardrobe smelt of moth-balls and of a faint perfume. She found all kinds of things that she had long forgotten about but not that jersey. What was that, now? Something bright and silky, very nice to feel. Mummy's silk shawl, of course. Sonya had not seen it for some five years and had forgotten clean about it.

Mummy never wore that shawl: she was not fond of very bright things and dressed simply and plainly. Sonya drew the folded shawl out of the wardrobe. The light caught it. Oh, how it shimmered! And what a lovely pattern! She held it by the edge and the shawl fell open into a rich mass of material. She raised her hands and the shawl fluttered over her like a cloud and enfolded her from head to foot.

She went over to the mirror again. How glamorous she looked! Quite like a ballerina in some oriental ballet such as *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai.* Standing on tiptoe she turned her body swiftly so that the hem of the shawl floated around her like a cloak or the train of a dress. She curtsied and bowed and walked about the room watching her reflection in the mirror. The shawl bestowed grace and volatility on all her movements, making every gesture dance-like. It seemed to her that thanks to this bright and delicate material even her face had changed a little; her features looked sharper, more clearly defined. And with what ethereal lightness the silvery material rested on her dark hair. If only she could walk on to the stage like that, advance to the orchestra.... She frowned and her eyes darkened. She smiled, and her teeth glistened, her eyes shone bright....

Suddenly the silence of the empty flat was shattered by a sharp metallic sound—the click of the front-door latch.

Sonya froze with the unexpectedness of it.

Who could be opening the door, she had the key in her pocket?

She was given no time for thought, however—footsteps were already thundering through the flat, drawing nearer.

"She's here, she's at home," a familiar voice rang out.

The door burst open.

"Slava, you!" cried Sonya. Her voice was taut with emotion.

With a bound Slava flung his arms round her and hung on to her so hard that he almost bowled her over. They both got entangled in the shawl. Struggling to free herself from both shawl and embrace, Sonya mumbled helplessly:

"Oh, Slava, how you've... how you've grown. You used to come only up to my chin and now you're almost up to my forehead. Oh, do stop, you'll have me off my feet in a minute. Let me take a look at you. Have you come for long? For good? Why didn't you write?"

At last Sonya was able to free herself of the shawl and to shake Slava off. He went on bouncing around her and babbling away:

"I've brought you some lovely herrings. We get them in the regiment. We're at another station now. The whole regiment has been transferred here, across the lake. Listen, Sonya, I've flown in a transport plane. We're quite near to the city now, it only took me an hour to get here. When did you last eat herring, Sonya?"

But Sonya was not listening. She had suddenly noticed a strange figure at the door, watching her.

Who could it be? Someone who had come with Slava? Had he seen her with that shawl on?

The man was not young, he was broad-shouldered, of average height, and he wore a black greatcoat; his face was broad and rather undistinguished. He held his black cap in his hands and in the electric light his balding forehead gleamed. He was watching Sonya attentively, a shy smile on his lips.

Slava suddenly seemed to remember his presence.

"Oh, this is Major Lunin, Sonya."

5

Sonya was not at all what Lunin had expected her to be. From the way Slava had talked of her he had imagined her to be much older. Why, she was a mere kid, a slip of a girl. A lanky youngster with the same childish look in the face as Slava himself.

And, of course, he had not expected to see that strange combination of bright shawl and slacks, or that pure forehead, those black arched brows, or, in fact, that face at all, with its way of expressing such serene, abundant, unsullied joy. He was greatly impressed and stirred by the boisterous delight both brother and sister took in their reunion. They nearly bowled each other over, they hugged, they laughed, they clattered about the room, getting entangled in the shawl on the floor. They were so engrossed in each other that for a long time they paid Lunin not the least attention.

When Slava at last caught sight of him and told Sonya who that was the colour mounted to her thin, pale cheeks.

"Why, I thought you'd be quite different."

She probably blurted out the words involuntarily. Her blush deepened, invading her forehead, her neck, her ears. She turned quite raspberry. She looked miserable. Lunin, too, felt shy and confused; he was at a loss to know how he could help her.

Slava was eager to treat his sister to the herring he had brought her from the station, so they moved into the kitchen where the gurgling kettle awaited them on the stove top. The flames leaped brightly. As she cleaned the fish, poured tea and sliced the loaf Sonya lost her shyness. Now she could look at Lunin almost fearlessly. She spread a clean cloth on the kitchen table—she did not want her visitor to eat off a newspaper. Herring was a rare treat for her and she ate it with unconcealed zest. But she did not neglect Lunin and pressed him to eat up. Lunin, however, said he only wanted to drink, and, with

a big cup of scalding tea before him, he sat watching the children through the curling steam.

They could not be said to resemble each other. Slava, tow-headed, with light eyes and fair eyebrows, took entirely after his father's, the Bystrov side of the family, while dark-eyed, raven-haired Sonya was a true Mednikov, resembling her mother and her grandfather, and taking after her father only in height. Strangers did not usually take them for brother and sister. An attentive eye, however, at once picked out points of resemblance. And when he looked at Sonya Lunin noted in her certain features he had long grown familiar with in Slava. Her voice reminded him of Slava's, her manner of pronouncing words, too, her smile, and the sharp-etched outline of her brow and nose, and many other little details.

At first, while Sonya and Slava were too busy tucking in, conversation flagged somewhat, only to flare up with renewed force. Sonya livened up and grew almost as talkative as Slava. They interrupted each other, they jumped from one topic to another, they both talked at once.

Slava talked about the squadron and the regiment, he described air battles, his flight across Lake Ladoga in a transport plane, he kept mentioning pilots by name. Then suddenly he would break off with a, "What about my skates? Are they all right?"

Sonya ran her eyes and fingers carefully over everything Slava was wearing and suggested he must feel too hot going about in long trousers made of such thick cloth.

"I see that for all your naval uniform you still don't wash behind your ears," she said at the end of her inspection.

To which Slava replied, with a pout: "You big silly."

But he was really not at all offended. He felt that underneath Sonya respected him for his uniform, his life at the air station, and his friendship with Lunin. And this flattered him.

Sonya made several clumsy attempts to thank Lunin for

taking care of Slava, but as the only result was to make Lunin look thoroughly unhappy and even angry, she broke off and fell silent. To give her no opportunity of reopening the subject of gratitude Lunin persistently asked Sonya about herself and her life. Everything she had to tell him about the Komsomol team struck him as being extraordinary and made a deep impression on him. The assistance to people weakened by the famine, the rescuing of the orphaned children, even the potato-planting and the dismantling of the timber houses seemed to Lunin like links in a chain of amazing feats, and he tried to worm out of her as many details as possible in order to get a clearer picture in his mind. Sonya replied willingly, if rather too tersely; she considered her life and work as being quite commonplace, and she could not understand how a hero like Lunin could be interested in them. The only time she let herself go a little was when she came to describe the welding of the water-pipes. It was clear that she was really taken up with that.

"Now that the regiment is stationed so near town Slava will be able to visit you every week," said Lunin. "And, at a pinch, you could sometimes come to us and see how we're getting on."

"Could I really?"

"It could be arranged," said Lunin with a smile.

"If the Guards Major says so, everything will be all right," said Slava grandly. "You won't be let to the aircraft, of course, but as to the cabin—well, why not? I'll show everybody—Ilya Tatarenko, Kolya Khametov, Shura Ryabushkin! . . .

It was decided that Slava should stay in town overnight and find his own way to the air station in the morning. He could take the No. 10 tram and then walk the rest of the way. In these circumstances Sonya decided to spend the night at the flat. Lunin, however, had to get back to the squadron that night. In fact, he should have left long ago because he had intended to take a stroll; he had not

seen Leningrad for almost a year. But he sat on and on, drinking one cup of tea after another. And he felt he could sit there for ever, beside the noisy little stove, for ever watching these two children and listening to their laughter and their chatter. . . .

He rose to his feet and put on his cap. Brother and sister came into the hall to see him off. All sense of strain between him and Sonya had vanished; Slava, leaping and jumping, walked on his left, Sonya on his right. As he was about to open the front door a shell howled over the house and burst somewhere quite near.

Slava clutched his left hand, Sonya his right.

"Shelling! Don't go out. Better wait a bit. . . ."

They held on to him firmly and would not release him. Two more shells lopped over the house but burst farther off than the first. Then they could no longer hear the whine of the shells though they could hear them exploding regularly some distance away.

"He's shelling the Vyborg Side now," said Sonya, who knew all the sounds of shelling only too well. "Wait. Now he'll send another one over here."

But Lunin gently freed his hands and left.

The wind howled in the long straight streets, whipping up powdery snow. Lunin drew deep breaths of the fresh cold air. So that was Sonya! Clear and straightforward, with all the charm of budding womanhood. She reminded him of his wife, of Lisa. Not the Lisa of those last years but the Lisa he had met when she was a girl, and had married.

There was not the least resemblance in looks between Sonya and Lisa, but when he had first got to know Lisa she, too, had had that girlish charm. This unexpected meeting with Sonya suddenly evoked such a tumult of thoughts and emotions that he made no attempt to sort them out. With unusual vividness he recalled that sensation of being in love which had once upon a time possessed him and made him so happy. That was all over. He could not have

acted differently. And yet... perhaps he should have acted differently, after all. Anyway, that was all beyond repair. It was all over. For ever. Was everything quite hopeless, though? Why did he now feel so strangely happy? Why did he keep before him Sonya's arched brows and her childlike smile, and hear her voice ringing on and on in his ears?

He walked fast and purposefully, though he had no idea where his legs were carrying him. In the street the explosions sounded louder than they had done indoors but he paid no attention to them. He had a few hours to spare and had decided in advance to spend them wandering about the city, and it made no difference to him where he went. Wrapped up in his thoughts he, at first, scarcely noticed what was going on around him. He was half-way across Palace Bridge when a shell passed low overhead with a deep dull whine.

The Germans had stopped shelling the Vyborg Side and, as Sonya had foretold, were directing their fire on the district of the Exchange, the Admiralty and Kronverk Gardens. Perhaps they were aiming by the spire of the Peter and Paul Fortress. The shells were passing right over the bridge and the first of them fell in the river between the fortress and the Winter Palace. In the city the Neva had not yet frozen and the bright splashes in the water were clearly seen from the bridge. On the whole length of the long bridge there were only two pedestrians —Lunin and a woman who was walking about fifty paces ahead of him. She walked fast and, evidently, would very much like to break into a run. She glanced over her shoulder to see whether anybody was looking. Noticing Lunin she pulled herself together and went on walking. Meanwhile a tram-car tore across the bridge at a violent pace— the driver was anxious to get out of the firing-zone as quickly as possible.

Palace Square was utterly deserted, and this made it look even bigger than usual. Walking through the Grand

Staff arch, Lunin reached the Nevsky Prospekt. Even here, in the centre of the city, there were few people about. The pavements, lightly dusted with snow, looked disproportionately broad. Rare motor-vehicles—mostly army lorries—dashed by at full speed, ignoring the cross-roads, without fear of knocking anyone over.

A year ago there had been more people about. But they had been mere shadows of people who could hardly drag themselves along. The men and women Lunin saw now were walking briskly and when he met their glances he saw that they were calm and firm. Shells were still bursting somewhere over to the left, but the passers-by paid no more heed to them than they did to the bell of a tram-car clanking past. And the city itself, despite the grim ruins of bombed buildings and the shrapnel-pocked façades, despite the charred arches of the gutted Gostiny Dvor, looked to Lunin clean, calm, austere and braced for action.

Lunin turned into Liteiny Prospekt and only then realized where he was going. His legs were taking him to that familiar part of the city where the house Lisa used to live in stood. He knew very well that Lisa was no longer there, that the house itself no longer existed, but, all the same, he walked on in order to pass that way again. Off Liteiny Prospekt he turned down Pestel Street, passing a chemist's shop, reached the Mokhovaya and for three minutes stood in front of a house which looked quite intact from outside but which was nothing but a skeleton inside.

Then he strolled away. Now he had no idea where he was going. Again, as a year ago, he automatically went to the Fontanka embankment. Again, in the Summer Gardens, his expert eye picked out the camouflaged anti-aircraft battery among the twisted tree trunks and the black twigs. Here was the place where he had overtaken the woman to whom he had given the bread he had brought for Lisa's mother. Where was that woman now? He had left her at

Kobona and not heard a word of her since. Were her children alive?

He recalled the old woman who lived in the same flat with her and who had refused to be evacuated. Had she survived? It was unlikely. Anna Stepanovna, that was her name. What if he should try to find her? No, it was no use. He would probably not be able to find the house she lived in. All the same he headed for Mayakovsky Street. After some hunting around he found the house, too, and the right entrance. He climbed the stairs, recognized the door of the flat, rang and knocked. But no one opened to him.

He waited for a little on the landing and then walked down. He went slowly, reluctantly. Suddenly the downstairs door slammed and he heard quick light steps on the stairs. Someone was pattering up the stairs towards him.

"Anna Stepanovna!"

"Good afternoon, Konstantin Ignatyevich," said Anna Stepanovna, "I recognized you immediately. Come up, come up. Please do, come and pay me a visit."

She had not changed in the least.

A small, bent, mouse-like figure, she slipped past him nimbly and hurried up the stairs. The hem of her skirt swept the floor. As they walked up she was talking about something, but since, as usual, she had started in the middle, Lunin could make neither head nor tail of it.

The key clicked in the door and they went inside. The rooms were all empty and locked. Anna Stepanovna occupied the kitchen; it was warm, tidy and cosy there. She sat Lunin at the table while, with her usual fussiness, she lit a fire in the small iron stove, stood a kettle on it and then rinsed her big brown knotty hands over the sink. She talked all the time, incessantly; Lunin noticed she made frequent references to "our factory."

"How are you getting on, Anna Stepanovna?" he asked.

"It's all right," she replied. "We're working."

"D'you mean to say you're working? How long have you been doing that?"

"Since spring."

"Where?"

"At a factory."

"What kind of factory?"

"I'm not allowed to say. That's a secret."

She cast him a proud, significant glance.

"What are you making there?"

"Guns," she replied. "But I can't tell you what kind."

She set about telling him how she went to work every day—by tram there and back. She described the people she met in the tram and what she said to them and they said to her. Hitherto she had spent all her life in the narrow circle of a few near-by streets and it was obvious that she took a keen interest in those long trips to the outskirts of the city, where "her factory" was located.

Lunin, however, could not accustom himself to the idea of this old crone making munitions for use against the Germans.

"Tell me, though, Anna Stepanovna," he asked, "what are *you* doing there?"

"I'm a wiper."

"A wiper?"

"The barrels are all greasy," she said, as if sorry for him for his ignorance. "So we wipe them clean with rags."

The kettle came to the boil and she brewed some tea and poured two cups. Lunin groped in his pocket for a hunk of bread wrapped up in paper, but Anna Stepanovna stopped him.

"What are you thinking of?" she flared up. "Visitors don't bring their own bread. Not these days."

There was sugar for the tea, too. Anna Stepanovna laid some millet pancakes on the table and insisted that Lunin taste them. Over tea she told him she could not eat all her rations.

"I got out of the habit of eating last year. All my insides

dried up. All I need now is a scrap like this and it's enough for the day. What I don't eat I give to Torkunova. She's a woman that lives in Baskov Street. She's got a little girl. So I take things for the little girl."

Suddenly, without any change of tone, she said: "Every time Maria Sergeyevna writes she asks after you. Has Konstantin Ignatyevich been to see you—she asks—the naval man who saved me and the children?"

"You mean to say she writes to you?"

"Yes."

"How is she?"

"She's all right. She was very ill to begin with and little Irina was ill, too. Now, it seems, they're all right. I'll write and tell her you called. She's always asking. And there's somebody else I know she'd like to ask about, to know whether he called, but she can't bring herself to mention it. That one doesn't come and he doesn't write. So much time's gone by. Maybe he's dead, maybe he's found someone else."

"Where is she?" Lunin asked.

She told him that during the spring and summer Maria Sergeyevna had lived in Yaroslavl. Some sort of hospital had been opened there for Leningrad evacuees who were in a specially bad way. Maria Sergeyevna and her children had been taken off the train more dead than alive. She was ill for a very long time, then she improved and wrote to the head mistress of the school where she used to teach. The school had moved to the Urals. The head mistress asked her to come and in August she left Yaroslavl for the Urals and had been back at work since the beginning of September.

"Would you like to write to her?" asked Anna Stepanovna. "I'll give you her address."

"What have I to write about?" Lunin said. "You write.... Remember me to her and tell her I'm glad she hasn't forgotten me."

He rose to leave.

"Is there anything you need?" he asked Anna Stepanovna.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing," she replied.

It was quite dark outside. The sky was black and starless. The houses, with their blacked-out windows, stood unseen in the gloom. All that could be seen was the white snow on the pavements. Lunin crossed the Neva by the Liteiny Bridge and on the Vyborg Side thumbed an army lorry and climbed into the back. Just at that moment the German artillery, which had been quiet, started shelling the district of the Military Medical Academy and Finland Station. In the nocturnal silence of the deserted streets the crash of explosions was more deafening than ever; great sheets of flame reddened the sky. And as the lorry hurtled along the streets and Lunin sat jolting in the back, he thought how terrible it was that Sonya should be living in this city, under constant bombardment. And he realized that from now on he would never stop worrying about her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Break-Through

1

In the steppes between the Volga and the Don the destruction of the surrounded German armies continued. Before the New Year the Soviet Information Bureau released a detailed communiqué about the hopeless situation of the Germans at Stalingrad; they were now meeting the fate to which they had been doomed for some time. But

up in the north the lull continued and everything seemed to be frozen into immobility.

A snow-storm was raging.

The station ground staff wore themselves out in a struggle with the snow which every day piled up on the runway in shifting, powdery drifts whisked up in clouds by the wind. An impenetrable snow haze cut Lunin and his men off from the rest of the world.

But that lull, that immobility, that silence were deceptive. Under cover of the whirling snow haze, units were being moved, guns placed in position, and preparations made for a sudden, smashing blow. No one knew when the blow would eventually fall, but its impendence and inevitability were felt by all.

"Well, it'll be our turn soon," the pilots said as they stood in the regiment command post in front of Shakhbazyan's map of Stalingrad.

They believed that Tararaksin, who was always the best informed in the regiment about what was going on, knew the time-table of forthcoming events, and they pestered him with their questions.

"When?"

"Soon," Tararaksin would reply.

"Can't you be more precise?"

"When the snow-storm's over," Tararaksin would wink his right eye slyly.

"What's the good of listening to him. He doesn't know a thing."

"And if he did he wouldn't tell you."

The storm did not abate. If it lost its force at all it was only for a few hours, as if to regather it. At the beginning of the second week of January the sun appeared, but so faint that you could look at it without screwing up your eyes; the weather did not clear for long, and once again a violent, biting wind sprang up, tossing coiling masses of dry, stinging snow over the earth. On January 10, the blizzard raged stronger than ever. The pilots could hardly

keep on their feet as after supper they went in single file along the narrow path between the mess and their cabin. Brushing the snow off their tall fur-topped boots in the entry was a long and noisy business. They might have been bears. When they wiped their red, chapped faces and sat down panting on their beds the lamplight showed the snow-flakes that had lodged in their eyebrows melting. The small house they lived in shuddered under the gusts of wind, the blizzard swashed snow against the windows and roared in the stove-pipe, drowning all other sounds.

On these stormy nights the pilots found their cabin especially cosy. The round stove exhaled heat. Domino pieces came crashing down on to the table top. Some men sat on their beds reading; others wrote letters. Kostin argued with Tatarenko about the tactics of air combat. Compressing his lips stubbornly he analyzed in detail some episode in battle, using unhurried movements of his big palms to demonstrate the positions of the opposing aircraft. Tatarenko's swarthy face was full of mischief. He listened patiently to the end of Kostin's thorough and excellently contrived plans of battle and then suddenly smashed them with a swift, unexpected gesture. He beat Kostin because he always took into account the fact that reality was more varied than Kostin managed to foresee; for the most complicated problems that Kostin could devise he always found quite unexpected solutions which surprised all his listeners by their naturalness and simplicity. His hands would flutter, his loud laugh would ring out, his strong white teeth flash—and the persevering Kostin would have to start his calculations all over again.

Meanwhile, stretched on the floor in a corner fenced off by an empty bed, Karyakin and Khametov worked on the next number of *Battle Sheet*. Until it was ready they showed it to no one. Most of the writing and drawing was done by Khametov—he had a beautiful, even, clear handwriting. But the heart and soul of *Battle Sheet* was

Karyakin: he supplied the ideas. From time to time they exchanged a whispered word or two and plunged back into work. Karyakin often sang as he worked. He sang without words—an endless jumble of tunes, sad, triumphant, whimsical. Sometimes, to the general amusement, they quarrelled. Karyakin would make an ink smudge but all he would reply to Khametov's irritated scolding was the usual: "That's the way they taught me."

On the evening of January the 11th, the regiment commander came into the cabin of Two Squadron. Proskuryakov had Yermakov and Lunin with him. The pilots had just turned in and some were already dozing. But one glance at Proskuryakov and his companions was enough to tell them that at last the moment had come for which they had been waiting so hard.

Proskuryakov strode into the middle of the cabin without even brushing the snow from the broad shoulders of his leather coat. His face glowed from the smart of the driven snow. He beckoned to them all not to get out of bed.

"My friends," he said, "the High Command has ordered the blockade to be broken."

Everybody sat up.

"It's come at last," said someone.

"Yes, it's come," said Proskuryakov. "We belong to the Guards. Do you remember our oath?"

"We do," the young voices chorused back.

Not one of them had been in the regiment on the day of the presentation of the colours but they knew the words of the oath by heart.

"We'll break through. We'll have the people welcoming us," Proskuryakov continued. "We start tomorrow at dawn."

Proskuryakov was no hand at speech-making and had hardly ever made one in his life. But now he was so excited by the Order of the Day that had just been received that he felt an irresistible urge to share the news with

all. A few minutes before he had even argued about it with Yermakov who had advised him to pass the Order on only to the mechanics for the time being and to let the pilots have a night of undisturbed sleep. The advice was reasonable enough; the mechanics had to spend the night giving the aircraft a last check-over, while the pilots needed to sleep soundly till dawn. But Proskuryakov was too thrilled to pay heed to psychological subtleties, and he insisted that the meaning of the Order of the Day be brought to the immediate knowledge of every pilot.

"At their age they sleep soundly before any battle," he said.

He turned out to be right. After he had left, the pilots all started talking at once but within half an hour several of them had dozed off and in an hour the whole cabin was asleep.

2

The first thing the pilots did on awakening early the next morning was to listen for signs that the storm had died down. But the house was still shuddering under the blows of the wind, the stove-pipe howled, and when they went on to the porch the blizzard flung them reeling back against the door. Far from having abated the storm had grown even fiercer. On their way to their aircraft they had to shout to make themselves heard and lost sight of each other if they were more than a few paces apart.

But however loud the tempest roared the thunder of the Soviet guns overtopped it.

At 09.40 hours thousands of guns opened simultaneous fire on the German fortified positions along the south bank of the Neva.

The station was about eight miles from the front but even so the earth seemed to be cleaving underfoot from the roar. The cannonade thundered for two hours without a break, varying only slightly in timbre as the wind seered.

At 11.40 hours the guns lengthened their range to shell the depths of the enemy's positions and from a neighbouring air station Tararaksin learned that Stormoviks had taken off and were heading for the Neva. Lunin's squadron was instructed to escort them.

Captain Shakhbazyan ran hatless out of the regiment command post dug-out with a flare-pistol in his hand, ready to give the take-off signal. However, as the swirling eddies of snow enveloped him he changed his mind and, with the snow caking his dark curly hair, ran up to the aircraft and let off the flare right in front of them.

The aircraft took off one by one and disappeared instantly in the snow haze.

At three hundred feet the screen of snow that was being whirled up from the ground dispersed a little and horizontal visibility was slightly better. That was their maximum height: there was a ceiling of driving clouds at four hundred and fifty feet, and the Stormoviks they had to meet would certainly be flying below the clouds. Lunin was afraid of missing them and as he flew he looked keenly in all directions. At the appointed place, however, he caught sight of the Stormoviks ahead—a group of heavy hunchback planes, like a herd of bison.

He caught a glimpse of the Neva and of a broad dark belt lying beyond it. That black belt looked odd and unnatural against the white ocean of snow. Several miles broad, it had been made by the Soviet artillery. Along the whole vast area of the south bank where the German front line ran the shells had scattered the entire snow cover and churned it into the earth. Towards that black belt the Soviet infantry were surging across the ice of the river. Drowned in the whirling snow an immense moving mass of sheepskins and white camouflage cloaks filled the whole surface of the ice from bank to bank.

All day long the pilots saw the infantry advancing southwards, sometimes running, sometimes crawling on their bellies. All that blustery day—the first day of the

offensive—the three squadrons of the regiment flew above an immense battlefield that stretched over the whole upper and middle course of the Neva. Every forty-five minutes the aircraft returned to their station to refuel; then they were in the air again.

Most of the time they were escorting Stormoviks.

How many times did Lunin and his men see these Stormoviks attack during that day? They scattered columns of German tanks, they shot up lorries, blew up bridges, sprayed battalions marching on the roads, winkled batteries, and blasted wide breaches in the enemy's defences, through which the advancing infantry surged immediately.

The Germans resisted stubbornly, clinging to the countless lines of their trenches, to every hillock, ravine and hollow; they established dense knots of fire in the line of the Soviet advance and launched counter-attacks. They strained every nerve to hurl the Soviet infantry back from the south bank of the Neva. But that they could not do. Their hands were tied because, simultaneously with the Leningrad front, the Volkhov front had launched an offensive; over there, at Sinyavino, on the south shore of Lake Ladoga, fighting of no less severity was in progress. Nor were the Germans in a position to bring up any substantial reserves in that grim month of January, the worst they had yet known. The doomed and encircled troops outside Stalingrad were begging for relief and German reserves were being sent only there, to the Don, to the North Caucasus, to the Eastern Ukraine. At the end of the first day of the offensive the units of the Leningrad front on the south bank of the Neva had seized a belt over fifteen miles long and some three miles in depth.

On that first day the Luftwaffe took little or no part in the unfolding battle.

German bombers made no appearance at all. Only Messerschmitts turned up from time to time, zooming over the infantry; but they were few in number and they be-

haved with extreme caution. Because of the poor visibility the Soviet fighters met them rarely and, for the most part, learned of their presence only from the radio reports of the ground observation posts.

The Messerschmitts had only one task: to oppose the Soviet Stormoviks—but the task was too much for them. The Stormoviks operated under fighter protection, and the Messerschmitts no longer dared to take on the new Soviet fighters in open battle. Their only resort was to shadow the Soviet aircraft, hiding in the clouds or in the murk of the snow-storm, waiting for some moment of inadvertence or muddle or blunder, for a chance weakening of vigilance—and then to attack.

That was the kind of attack which befell Ryabushkin, the only pilot in the squadron who had to fight that day. Returning to station and flying last in formation Ryabushkin suddenly lost sight of his group. It was already late afternoon, the gloom of the blizzard was deepening into twilight and visibility was getting worse than ever; the aircraft flying ahead of him disappeared as if they had been rubbed out of the sky by an eraser. Ryabushkin felt no qualms at being left on his own: he was not at all far from the Neva and had no doubt that in a few minutes he would reach the station. Suddenly the R/T crackled and he heard a voice saying:

"Look out! There are two Messerschmitts coming in behind you."

He banked his aircraft immediately and doubled back, catching sight of both Messerschmitts for no more than a fraction of a second. They zoomed past in a climb and disappeared in the low cloud. Without a moment's hesitation Ryabushkin also climbed and entered the cloud, though he knew his chances of meeting the enemy were slender. Stubbornness made him climb still higher until he burst out of the cloud into blinding sunlight.

Overhead the sky was a brilliant blue with the huge

crimson ball of the setting sun propped on the horizon; its slanting beams lit up the whole ragged sea of cloud.

And just above him was a Messerschmitt, doubtless one of the two he had followed into the cloud.

He fired a burst but missed. The Messerschmitt dived under his aircraft and slipped into the cloud below.

Gritting his teeth with vexation and excitement Ryabushkin plunged down through the cloud and came out of it right above the Neva. The Messerschmitt was there, too, over the water, almost at his wing-tip. As soon as he saw Ryabushkin the German pilot shot up into the cloud again. Ryabushkin was after him in a flash. He flew through the cloud for the third time.

Crimson in the slanting rays of the sun the Messerschmitt hung immediately over Ryabushkin against a background of bright sky. Ryabushkin flew straight at him and gave him two bursts. This time the shots certainly found their mark. The Messerschmitt dived into the cloud and disappeared.

Ryabushkin, however, wanted to know for certain whether he had made a "kill" or not and followed the Messerschmitt. For the fourth time he cut through the wreathing vapour. The Messerschmitt broke cloud at the same time as he did. There was smoke streaming out of its fuselage and it went on losing height. It was finished, it must be. But Ryabushkin wanted to see it crash and followed it down, down to the Neva, to the ice and its streaming mass of sheepskin-clad Red Army men.

Suddenly, over the very ice, the Messerschmitt pulled out of its dive. It was so unexpected that Ryabushkin was momentarily perplexed. The Messerschmitt was above him before he realized what had happened. Dragging a trail of black smoke the German plane climbed stubbornly towards the cloud.

Ryabushkin dashed after it again. Surely he would not have to go through that cloud a fifth time in pursuit of that mule of a Messerschmitt that did not want to ditch.

Enough of this enormous seesaw—up down, up down. But he wasn't going to let the beggar get away.

The Messerschmitt had not the power left to reach the cloud. It circled and circled below it. During its third circle Ryabushkin got it in his sights and pumped a burst into it.

The Messerschmitt hurtled towards the ice. Ryabushkin followed it nearly all the way, afraid it might recover once more. But this was really the end. He saw Red Army men waving their caps to him as he flew in triumph over their heads.

Half an hour later Ryabushkin was sitting in the air-crew mess eating boiled mutton and millet gruel. It was dark outside and the blizzard howled in the stove-pipes. Ryabushkin's plump cheeks were flushed. He was full of the impressions of the battle, the chase and its successful conclusion.

His comrades' eyes dropped with weariness; they were all in after a full day of flying and fighting the snow-storm, but, like Ryabushkin, they were glowing with a sense of victory and pride in the realization that their hated enemy, whose cruelty and strength had been so appalling, was afraid of them and was retreating before them.

"We'll see what happens tomorrow," Kostin said suddenly. He had been kept back at the command post and was the last to enter the mess.

They all turned to him in surprise.

"It'll be the same as today," said Tatarenko.

"Not quite," said Kostin. "There's some news."

"What is it?"

"Focke-Wulfs. We must expect them to be in the air tomorrow."

"Who says so?"

"Who do you think? Reccy, of course."

Karyakin whistled. "Smashing," he said. "There'll be something to shoot down, at least. We didn't have a chance today."

The pilots laughed. However, they all well understood the enormous importance of Kostin's news. The Luftwaffe had been re-equipped. With the appearance of the new Focke-Wulfs a new relation of forces would be established in the air, and what that relation would be it was impossible to forecast. Only experience could show that.

3

Next morning there was at last a change in the weather. The snow continued to fall but the wind dropped considerably and went on dropping: there were times when it was quite still but then, as if remembering itself, the wind would rise again, only to drop a few moments later. The sky was still overcast but the clouds were thinner and through them the sun was just visible. It grew colder —about 20^0 C.—but visibility scarcely improved. It was typical Baltic weather, with frost bringing not clear skies but fog and humidity. The bare branches of the birch-trees, aspen and mountain-ash were clothed in hoar-frost and sagged under its weight. A frosty mist, so raw that it took your breath away, lay specially thick wherever there was a dip or a gully in the land, and in the air above the Neva. It was a murky grey in colour because in it, too, was the smoke of many fires.

Over there, across the Neva, everything was on fire. The Red Army's offensive continued. Now its main direction was more precisely defined—not southwards as had seemed at first but south-eastward, to meet the units of the advancing Volkhov front.

The very deep belt of fortified positions which the Germans had established during the seventeen months of the siege had not been completely overcome, and for that reason the offensive unfolded slowly, involving a series of stubborn battles round separate strong-points. It was to iron out these fortified knots with the help of artillery,

tanks and infantry that the Stormoviks were used; for the fighters the second day passed like the first—mainly in escorting Stormoviks.

The most remarkable and spectacular, and, at the same time, most difficult operation of the day was a Stormovik attack on a concentration of railway trains near Sinyavino. The whole of Lunin's squadron took part in it.

They had not been briefed to fly to Sinyavino at all and were escorting the Stormoviks in a quite different direction when both they and the Stormoviks got a sudden radio order to change course. Soviet reconnaissance had spotted that a number of enemy goods trains had just arrived at Sinyavino; they had to be destroyed immediately, before the Germans had time to unload them or take them away.

Lunin had not flown near Sinyavino since September and was approaching it for the first time not from the east but from the west. Long before they were over the station the German anti-aircraft batteries opened up with almost panic-stricken fury. Evidently there was something worth defending down there. There was also a quartet of Messerschmitts but they did not risk taking on a whole squadron of Soviet fighters and bolted. The bursts of flak drew a wide circle within which the fire was unusually intense. Both Stormoviks and fighters had to break into this deadly circle.

Their only safety lay in ceaseless manoeuvring. Breaking up into groups of two or three aircraft and executing complicated moves to put the anti-aircraft gunners off their mark and confuse them, they broke through to the railway station from different sides. All the lines were occupied by railway waggons. Lunin counted eight trains. Alongside them, on the road, stretched a great line of tarpaulin-covered lorries.

The Stormoviks got going.

When the first explosion came Lunin felt such a jolt that he thought his aircraft had been hit by flak. Then

came another shuddering jerk, followed by a third, and he realized that they were caused by the blast of explosions of exceptional power. Below, the ground was covered in dense clouds of smoke. But the Stormoviks plunged fearlessly into the smoke and went on with their job. Another explosion. Another. Lunin's aircraft rocked. He had never known anything like it. However, he was able to appreciate the real power of those explosions only when he saw a two-storey house, situated at least half a mile away from the railway line, sway and totter and collapse in ruins.

Why were these explosions so tremendous?

It was not difficult to guess.

The railway waggons destroyed by the Stormoviks had contained ammunition brought up by the Germans for their forces.

For a brief period the Germans were so taken aback that their anti-aircraft barrage weakened instead of growing stronger. But it took the gunners no more than a minute to readjust themselves to the situation. There seemed to be a gun in every clump of bushes. The fighters were still tolerably safe: they had manoeuvrability, they could dart up into the clouds, there was no need for them to hang over the railway line. But the Stormoviks were in a very awkward situation. They would never get away unscathed unless they turned at once and made off.

However, the chains of ammunition waggons were long and occupied several sidings stretching for several miles; time was needed to blow them all up. And the Stormoviks stayed and went on diving into the spreading cloud of smoke. They looked like big beetles as they fussed over the trains. About four minutes after the start of the attack one of them was hit.

Lunin did not actually see it happen. But from the heavy trail of smoke it dragged he could tell the Stormovik was on fire. The flames spread rapidly; within half a minute the fuselage was enveloped in them from tail to cabin.

There were two men in that cabin—the pilot and the gunner.

The blazing Stormovik went on flying as if nothing had happened. It plunged into the low-lying screen of smoke and opened fire on the trains. Lunin could see a crimson twinkle of tracers streaming ceaselessly from its rear turret. Then the blazing aircraft, still close to the ground, shot away from the railway, skimmed the ruined station buildings and headed for the road.

As soon as they came under fire the German lorries drawn up in an endless line on the road made an attempt to drive away. But three of them had been overturned by the explosions and they blocked the road for the rest. Shells had spilled from under the tarpaulin covers and lay glistening on the snow. There was no room to pass but the panic-stricken drivers pressed on and the lorries piled up in a dense mass, three or even four abreast. The blazing Stormovik headed slowly and steadily straight for that tangle of lorries.

Lunin again felt his aircraft tossed about. The road was enveloped in smoke. When it had dispersed there was nothing left to distinguish—neither lorries nor burning Stormovik. Everything was merged in a big, sinister dark patch.

The calm, efficient, natural way the two men in the doomed Stormovik had acted made a tremendous impression on everybody who saw what had happened. Now the attack was pressed home with full fury. Apparently quite indifferent to the flak the Stormoviks were concerned only to ensure that not a single railway waggon escaped. The station, the near-by settlement, the woods around—all were drowned in smoke. Heaven and earth shuddered with mighty explosions.

During the afternoon the mist cleared in low-lying places; it stopped snowing. The visibility became much better. After lunch Lunin was ordered to send four aircraft to provide air protection to the ground forces—the improved

weather might tempt German bombers out. He sent up Tatarenko, Kostin, Karyakin and Ryabushkin, and placed Tatarenko in command.

The aircraft flew the whole length of the front line and then turned back. They had just enough fuel left to get back to the station. The cloud ceiling was very high now—about 4,500 feet—and Kostin, Karyakin and Ryabushkin were flying right up against the clouds. Tatarenko, flying a short distance ahead, dived to observe a column of lorries moving towards the front; he was flying about 2,000 feet lower than his companions. Suddenly Kostin noticed two aircraft dart out of the clouds and head straight for Tatarenko.

Kostin had never seen aircraft like that before. They had curiously blunt noses and straight, square-tipped wings. And just because he had never seen them before he realized they were Focke-Wulfs.

At last! Well, now they would see.... Anyhow the Focke-Wulf pilots weren't very brave. Kostin was sure they were attacking Tatarenko only because they thought he was on his own. As soon as they discovered they had four, not one against them, they left Tatarenko and at once sought escape.

They climbed back into the cloud. H'm, they could certainly climb steeply. Fast and steeply. Much better than Messerschmitts.

The Soviet fighters were very low in fuel but that did not deter them. They could not let such an opportunity slip. They climbed just as steeply and just as fast. There was not a yard's difference between them. At the same speed, the same time, and almost at the same place the six aircraft pierced the cloud.

Seeing that escape was impossible the Germans decided to fight. Above all, they must not be allowed to make a frontal attack, thought Kostin. The Focke-Wulfs were undoubtedly more heavily armed than the Messerschmitts and their frontal attack might prove fatal. A pity the

other chaps weren't stronger on tactics.... But, apparently, Kostin's comrades understood as well as he did that there was no point in exposing themselves to a frontal attack. They circled round the Focke-Wulfs, trying to attack their tails without coming under fire themselves. This was an excellent test of the aircraft manoeuvrability and it showed that in this respect the German aircraft had no advantage over the Soviet fighters either in a vertical or horizontal plane. Karyakin and Ryabushkin concentrated on the second Focke-Wulf and managed to draw it a little out of line with its leader. Tatarenko, however, attacked the leading aircraft from the front, but kept below it as he fired.

The leading Focke-Wulf fell into a helpless side-slip with one wing tipped up. Its partner abandoned it, and disappeared in the clouds. The Soviet planes were now flying with almost empty tanks; they could not postpone their return for another moment. As they left they saw the Focke-Wulf dropping through the air like a falling leaf. Its engine was still working somehow and the pilot was making desperate efforts to right his aircraft. Very low, right over the tree-tops, he succeeded in doing so. The Focke-Wulf flattened out, and limped away, blindly and uncertainly, in an easterly direction.

It would have been child's play to overtake it and bring it down. But the tanks were empty. The fighters only just made it to station.

They climbed out of their aircraft with faces aflame with excitement. Their first skirmish with Focke-Wulfs and they'd got the better of them.

"If we'd only had enough fuel," fumed Kostin. "Ten minutes earlier and we'd have bagged both of them."

They had a sense of victory half-achieved, a sort of half-baked feeling.

"I gave him a good poke in the belly. He won't get far," said Tatarenko with conviction. "I'm sure he'll have to ditch somewhere."

"He's already done so," said Proskuryakov who had met them on the field.

Everybody knew what had happened, it turned out. The whole front had been following the contest between the Soviet fighters and the Focke-Wulfs. The regiment command post knew that Tatarenko had hit a Focke-Wulf within a minute of its happening. And they also knew what happened to that damaged aircraft afterwards.

"Somehow he managed to right himself," Proskuryakov told the pilots, "but his rudder was out of order. He didn't fly the way he wanted to go but where his rudder took him. He came out on the Ladoga coast just where our advanced lines are. He couldn't turn to starboard, to his own lines, he just flew straight on and ditched on the ice. Four hundred yards from our lines and just the same distance from the German lines. . . ."

"What about the pilot?" Tatarenko asked.

"The pilot landed on the ice and got back to his own lines."

"To hell with the pilot," said the regiment engineer who had been following all this talk in silence. "We ought to salvage the plane."

All the mechanics in the regiment were quite as interested in the Focke-Wulf as the pilots. They were impatient to know what novelties the Germans had devised and how the German aircraft-designers' minds had reacted to the appearance of new Soviet fighters. Everyone understood that it was the question of a contest where the slightest success or failure had enormous significance for the further course of the war. They bombarded with questions the four pilots who had seen the Focke-Wulfs with their own eyes. But what could the pilots say?

"Yes, they've got a nice little turn of speed," said Karyakin. "Didn't get away from us, though."

"Yes, they're probably pretty well armed," Ryabushkin agreed. "Who knows, though—they didn't get a shot in at us."

"Oh yes, they can manoeuvre all right," said Tatarenko. "But they're not as slippy as ours."

"Air-cooled engine, apparently," explained Kostin. "But I don't know whether that's an advantage or not."

All these comments, involuntarily vague, were based on casual impressions and could not satisfy the mechanics. What they needed was precise knowledge. And Regiment Engineer Fyodorov convinced Proskuryakov that they would have to capture the stranded Focke-Wulf and bring it back to the regiment.

"Our pilots shot it down so it's ours by right," said Fyodorov.

Every twenty minutes Tararaksin enquired by telephone about the fate of the Focke-Wulf. It was lying on the ice as before. The Germans had made several attempts to get hold of it but every time they set out on to the ice from the shore they were driven back by strong fire. However, the Germans did not let the Russians get to the aircraft either and kept that whole part of the lake under fire. Worst of all, they fired at the aircraft even when nobody was trying to reach it. If they couldn't have it, no one else should.

"We'll have to hurry up, otherwise they'll drop a shell into it," Fyodorov assured Proskuryakov.

Proskuryakov was as keen as anybody to see the Focke-Wulf but he did not want to risk lives for the sake of a damaged German aircraft. However, when the regiment engineer told him he intended going out himself and that the salvaging would be done under cover of darkness he agreed. Dusk was already falling and preparations for the expedition were set on foot immediately.

Fyodorov took with him several mechanics including Deyev, and a number of men from the ground staff battalion. The four pilots who had taken part in the battle with the Focke-Wulfs begged to be taken, too, but Proskuryakov curtly ordered them to stay behind. The expedition drove

to the shore of the lake in a lorry, the regiment engineer in front with the driver, the rest in the back.

It was much colder than in the morning, the wind had fallen completely, the clouds had disappeared and there were stars twinkling in the dark sky—the first that had been seen for a month. In the cold still air the ceaseless rumble of the battle was so loud that the fighting might have been going on just beyond the nearest pines instead of far away on the other shore of the Neva. The whole southern half of the sky blazed with flashes of gunfire as brilliant as sheet lightning.

The lorry ran along a track of beaten snow and went on to the Neva's ice opposite Shlisselburg. It was already quite dark but, even so, they could make out to their left the dark, uncouth mass of the ruins of Shlisselburg Fortress against the starlit sky. The feat of its garrison, which had held out for month after month, had been crowned with success. Shlisselburg had been relieved and the island-fortress on the river now lay in the rear of the Red Army.

They found the liberated town itself in ruins, enveloped in the murk of dying conflagrations. The lorry drove quickly on towards the front line. Once through Shlisselburg they came out on the shore of the lake east of the town.

This was the southern shore which till quite recently had been in German hands. From there they had shelled the Ice Road. By the end of the second day of the Red Army's offensive the part of that shore which adjoined Shlisselburg had already been regained. But farther to the east, near the coastal village of Lipki, the Germans were still lodged. The damaged Focke-Wulf lay on the ice halfway between the opposing lines.

Leaving the lorry on the shore, Fyodorov led his little group forward to reconnoitre the position. The wind had swept the ice clear of snow and the going was easy. The darkness provided effective cover. They soon reached the

Focke-Wulf and conferred in whispers about their next move. The engineer proposed that the aircraft be pushed to the shore by hand. But they discovered that the undercarriage had been damaged and that it was more difficult to push than they had imagined. It would take them all night to get it to the shore; speed however was essential: the Germans might at any moment notice their activities on the ice and open fire. Deyev suggested bringing the lorry up to the aircraft over the ice. This was a hazardous plan because the Germans might hear the sound of the engine and tumble to what was going on. However, after reflecting, the engineer decided to risk it.

They managed to get the lorry up to the Focke-Wulf all right. The mechanics moved the aircraft's tail into the back of the lorry and secured it with ropes. The lorry drove back towards the shore dragging the aircraft after it.

Then the Germans spotted them. Machine-guns, mortars and artillery burst into fire simultaneously. Mines crashed, shells burst, bullets whistled. For several long minutes the mechanics lived through hell while the lorry with its load moved at a snail's pace towards the shore.

But at last they left the exploding mines behind them; the firing gradually subsided. The lorry dragged the Focke-Wulf on to the flat shore and brought it slowly through Shlisselburg, across the Neva and through the woods to the station.

It was after two in the morning when the Focke-Wulf was finally placed in the MARU workshops—a big cold shed on the edge of the airfield. Fyodorov and his mechanics, however, did not go to bed that night. Until dawn they were busy on the German aircraft, taking down the engine, studying its instruments and examining every detail of its construction. As the sun came up Lunin and Tatarenko entered the repair-shed.

"Well, what about it?" Lunin asked, looking with curiosity at the Focke-Wulf.

"Nothing new," said Fyodorov. "Old stuff."

"Any improvements on ours?"

"None at all."

"And any disadvantages?"

"Yes, a serious one," said Fyodorov thoughtfully.

"What's that?"

"Poor field of vision. It's hard for the pilot to see what's happening down below his nose. The engine's too big. It blocks the view."

"I realized that during the fight," said Tatarenko suddenly. "I kept under his nose and got him from that angle."

4

That morning, on the third day of the offensive, the sky was clear and cloudless. The sun, huge, frosty and crimson, lit up the snow. There was not a trace of mist in the air. Sounds travelled an enormous distance with exceptional clarity and at the station the whole symphony of battle was audible. Every explosion seemed to make the vast expanse of air quiver like a huge bell.

The weather did not change again after that. Fog, wind and snow-storm seemed to have gone for ever. Clear starlit nights followed dazzlingly bright days and were succeeded by days no less brilliant. All through these frosty sunlit days and starry nights the Red Army continued to advance across the sparkling, powdery snow. The offensive developed slowly, in the face of stubborn German resistance, but every day the distance between the Leningrad and the Volkhov fronts grew less and the ring of the blockade slackened.

The pilots of Lunin's squadron flew from dawn to dusk. It was a hard spell for them—they all grew noticeably thinner, their faces looked older and sterner. When they turned in at night they were so tired that they hardly spoke and slept like logs.

But though hard these were happy days. Despite some increase in the Luftwaffe's strength the Soviet squadron got the better of their opponents in skirmishes. Soviet air superiority had been established firmly and unfalteringly and this filled Lunin's men with joyful pride.

Thanks to well-organized radio communication the Soviet fighters received much help from ground observation posts.

"Look out!" the signal would come. "There are two Messerschmitts under your tail."

One day Tatarenko and Khametov dealt so promptly with two Messerschmitts spotted by a ground observer that the observer was quite unable to follow the course of the fighting and did not grasp what had happened.

"Look out!" the observer called. "There are two Messerschmitts about somewhere but for some reason I can't see them now."

"You won't see 'em again," replied Tatarenko. "They've had it."

In the January battles the individual qualities of each pilot were manifested with special clarity. These men were no longer novices, beginners, they were fighter-pilots with great experience of war. Their flying qualities varied according to the individual. Everybody in the regiment and the division well knew that in Lunin's squadron there were two pilots—Tatarenko and Kuznetsov—who far outstripped the rest in flying and fighting ability. Their battle scores were higher than anyone else's. Hardly a day passed without their names being mentioned in connection with some fresh victory in the air.

Both of them were virtually Lunin's deputies, his closest assistants. It was usually either Tatarenko or Kuznetsov who would be placed in command of a group of aircraft if the operation required not the whole but only a part of the squadron to take the air. Between the two men there was a rivalry which they did everything to conceal but which, of course, was no secret from anyone.

Outwardly, Kuznetsov was a cold, reserved man. But the squadron, which had long ago taken his measure, knew that this appearance of coldness was a superficial impression and that in fact he was of fiery, hot-blooded disposition. Kuznetsov was older than Tatarenko, he had served longer and, it went without saying, he could not stand by calmly and let Tatarenko outstrip him. There was one sphere in which he was unrivalled in the whole division—reconnaissance. It meant a lot, of course, to be the best reconnaissance pilot, but it had a disadvantage, too; being sent out frequently on reconnaissance, he took part in less fighting than Tatarenko and could not equal the latter's score of shot-down aircraft.

Tatarenko, on the other hand, wore his heart on his sleeve. And he had one fine quality that made everybody like him—he rejoiced sincerely in the successes of his comrades. If Ryabushkin or Khametov or Ostrosablin brought down a German aircraft he shared their delight and marvelled at their valour and resourcefulness. If he shot down one when flying with others he always stressed their part and not his own when he made his report or described the incident. But, of course, he, like everybody else, understood that neither Ryabushkin nor Ostrosablin, nor even Khametov or Kostin were in the same class as he, despite all their successes. But Kuznetsov was quite another matter. Every time Kuznetsov shot down a plane Tatarenko was on his guard. He would make careful enquiries about how it had happened and study attentively every detail of the fighting. Then he would say:

"Well, all right. . . ."

Everyone knew what that meant. It meant that Tatarenko would have no rest until he had matched what Kuznetsov had done, or go one better, even.

On January 13 Tatarenko shot down a Focke-Wulf.

Throughout almost all the next day Kuznetsov was out on reconnaissance. Only once did he go out with Ostrosablin, to provide cover for the ground forces. His sharp

eyes picked out two Messerschmitts flying close to the ground and he dived on them, followed by Ostrosablin. Kuznetsov shot down one of the Messerschmitts at once and chased the other all the length of the front up to Sinyavino where he brought it down in flames. The German pilot baled out of the blazing aircraft.

On the 15th Tatarenko, leading a group of four aircraft, met seven Messerschmitts. He at once took the fighters into the attack and, as the result of a short skirmish, three Messerschmitts were shot down. Tatarenko bagged two of them, the third fell to Karyakin and Ryabushkin.

On the morning of the 16th, Kuznetsov, while on reconnaissance, sighted a Messerschmitt-110 flying below him. He approached it from behind and got on its tail. The Messerschmitt-110's tail was protected by the guns in its rear turret. The gunner spotted Kuznetsov from far off and opened fire on him at a very long range. Kuznetsov kept up the chase stubbornly and gave the German a burst as he came up to him. The rear gunner stopped firing at once—killed, probably. Kuznetsov then got right on to the Messerschmitt-110's tail and with his fourth burst of fire brought it down.

The same evening, in the light of a dazzling sunset that embraced half the sky, Tatarenko, leading Kostin, Khametov and Dziga, met five Junkers-88s on a bombing mission. The Junkers were escorted by two Messerschmitts and two Focke-Wulfs.

Tatarenko attacked them head-on.

The Junkers were flying in line, strung out one after the other. Tatarenko, flying in the lead of his four, pumped bullets into the first Junkers from below. He dived underneath it and without turning to see what had happened to it, flew on at the second bomber. He wanted to shoot at as many Junkers as possible before the Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs managed to intervene.

This plan proved correct. The second Junkers crashed in the forest at the same time as the first which Kostin

had bagged as he followed Tatarenko down the line. Meanwhile Tatarenko attacked the third and fourth Junkers. The Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs were streaking for him but he manoeuvred out of their fire and went on shooting at the Junkers. In this he was helped by Khametov and Dziga who adopted the same tactics as he; avoiding battle with the German fighters they pressed their attack on the bombers. The third and fourth Junkers were shot down within half a minute of the first two. The fifth managed to escape. It flew off southwards escorted by the two Focke-Wulfs and the Messerschmitts.

Four bombers brought down by four fighters thanks to intelligent manoeuvring—that was something for the whole division to think about. But before another day had passed, on the evening of the 17th, Kuznetsov, repeating in more difficult circumstances what Tatarenko had done, achieved similar results.

Kuznetsov was accompanied by Ostrosablin, Karyakin and Ryabushkin. In the sunset they met twenty German aircraft. Ten Junkers were in the lead; ten fighters—eight Messerschmitts and two Focke-Wulfs—flew a little higher and farther back.

Kuznetsov repeated Tatarenko's manoeuvre. His four attacked the Junkers head-on and outstripped the German fighters. In the few seconds that elapsed before the Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs reached the scene, four Junkers had been shot down. The rest of them made off, unloading their bombs at random in the forest. Beating off a belated attack by the Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs, Kuznetsov led his four back to base.

That day, January 17, was the sixth day in the battle to lift the siege of Leningrad. Late in the evening, before turning in for the night, Lunin walked into the cabin occupied by the pilots of his squadron. He dropped in at this hour every evening and always found the men asleep. It was the same this time. But not quite. Kuznetsov's bed

was empty. Kuznetsov, still dressed, was sitting at the table with his back to the door. He was writing something.

Lunin was surprised. He knew what a heavy day Kuznetsov had had.

"Writing a letter?" he asked.

He came up behind Kuznetsov and laid a hand on his shoulder, to prevent him rising.

"No," said Kuznetsov. "Read it, please, Comrade Guards Major."

"I request the Party organization," Lunin read, "to accept me for the C.P.S.U., as I want to fight the fascists as a member of the Bolshevik Party. I shall fight to the last drop of my blood for the liberation of Soviet soil. Kuznetsov, Anton Ivanovich."

Carefully freeing himself from Lunin's hand, Kuznetsov got up and looked the major straight in the eyes, waiting for him to say something.

But Lunin said nothing.

"I shall give it to Deyev tomorrow," Kuznetsov said.

The morning of January the 18th was more brilliantly fine than ever. Since sunrise everybody at the station had been in a state of high excitement, for news had come that near the south shore of Lake Ladoga units of the Leningrad front had reduced the distance between them and the units of the Volkhov front, which were surging towards them, to a mere two or three miles. The enemy ring, which had been throttling Leningrad for so long, was wearing very thin and everyone felt that only one more effort was needed to break it.

Uvarov was with the regiment. During the recent week he had come there almost every day. This time he arrived during the night and brought with him a Captain Zubkov, the secretary of the Party commission. Next morning Deyev met Uvarov and showed him Kuznetsov's application. To tell the truth, Deyev was not a little surprised at the emotion this application aroused in the division commissar. Uvarov advised him to call a Party meeting

in the squadron without further delay and to consider Kuznetsov's application at once.

"By the way, the secretary of the Party commission is here," he said. "I'll come to the meeting, too."

"But they're on duty," said Deyev hesitantly. "All the pilots and mechanics are on the runway."

"Well, hold the meeting out there, near the runway," said Uvarov. "We'll choose the right moment. It's most important. . . ."

The Party meeting was held on the airfield, in a small cramped dug-out near the runway which had been built for men to slip over to and get warm. The Party members, most of them mechanics, sat in a close circle round the hot little stove. The grey smoke of coarse tobacco, rising from cleverly carved perspex holders, formed a cloud over their heads. Uvarov brought to the meeting not only Zubkov but Yermakov and Proskuryakov, too. The dug-out was too small for the bulky Proskuryakov so he stood in the entrance, stooping cautiously so as not to bump his pate on the beam.

Kuznetsov, in full flying kit, stood in the middle of the dug-out near the stove. He held his helmet in his hands. He had already been up twice that morning.

Deyev read out his application. Then he carefully drew from his mapcase another sheet of paper which listed Kuznetsov's fighting record.

"Junior Lieutenant Kuznetsov's fighting record is good," said Deyev.

He intended to read from the record but Proskuryakov proposed this be omitted.

"We all know Kuznetsov; he's done his fighting under our eyes."

When the recommendations were read out some were surprised to hear in what warm terms Regiment Commissar Yermakov had recommended Kuznetsov. Many in the squadron remembered that for a long time Yermakov had made no secret of his distrust of the man.

Then Captain Zubkov asked Kuznetsov to tell them about himself.

Kuznetsov spoke quietly and his even-toned voice was so calm that one might have thought he was talking not about himself but about some other person in whom, moreover, he was not at all interested. But his hands gave him away: he kept on crumpling and twisting his helmet.

Kuznetsov's life-story was simple enough. He was the only son of an Ivanovo textile worker who had been left a widow when young. He had dreamed of being a pilot as long as he remembered himself. He had not been very bright at school and had even stayed down in one class two years running. He had been a Young Pioneer, then a Komsomol member. He had gone on to a flying-school but he never graduated. He had been expelled. Expelled from the flying-school and from the Komsomol, too. He imparted this information in the same even tone of voice as before. But the helmet in his hands, crumpled and twisted, turned faster and faster.... Yes, he had been expelled for disgraceful behaviour while drunk.

"No need to dwell on that," said Uvarov. "Not interesting. All belongs to the past. Go on, please."

But Kuznetsov had practically nothing left to tell. After being expelled from the flying-school he did not go back to his mother at Ivanovo. He felt too ashamed. First he went north and got a job as a rafter. At the end of the season he moved to Leningrad and entered a factory. He worked there through one winter, and up to the outbreak of war when he was called up. On being drafted into an air-station service battalion, he swept snow on the airfield. The division commissar recognized him and helped him to get back into an air crew. That was all.

Kuznetsov's application was accepted unanimously.

The telephone rang. Proskuryakov picked up the receiver.

"Two Squadron to take off at once," he said.

Everybody shot out of the dug-out. Kuznetsov ran to his aircraft, putting on his helmet as he went.

On this occasion the whole squadron was required and Lunin led it. All the pilots were in the cockpits waiting for the flare when Captain Shakhbazyan suddenly ran up to them, shouting:

"Kuznetsov to remain behind. There's a special job for him."

The squadron took off without Kuznetsov.

Lunin took his squadron across the Neva to provide protection to the ground forces against bombing. Once they had crossed the line of the river, they turned east and flew over a broad belt of liberated territory. Though visibility was excellent and the sky cloudless there was not a single German aircraft to be seen. They sighted Lake Ladoga when they were almost fifteen miles away from it. They flew nearer and the lake's vast expanse, its snow-cover sparkling in the sun, grew in breadth and immensity with every second.

Flying over Shlisselburg Lunin led the squadron farther to the east over the southern shore of the lake. Like all his pilots he wanted to see with his own eyes that place where the infantry of the two fronts were surging forward to meet each other and force a breach in the blockade, one group coming from outside the ring, the other from within. How much farther had they to go before they met?

The aircraft were flying low and Lunin could clearly see everything that was going on down below. Along the roads, through the forest, over the fields, across the ice of the Krugo-Ladozhsky Canal the Red Army was moving eastwards. They moved fast, sometimes at the double. The farther the infantry advanced the more men took to the double; and as they ran they waved their guns and rifles, flung their caps into the air and shouted. Lunin was waiting to see the front line and the Germans. But there was no front line, there were no Germans. Instead of Germans

he saw more groups of Red Army men. And these were running not eastwards but westwards.

He realized that the Leningrad and Volkhov fronts had merged. Now the aircraft were flying over units of the Volkhov front. It could only have happened a few minutes before, which explained why all those tens of thousands of men were celebrating.

Lunin swung the squadron round in a tight turn and led it to the west. He wanted to see the actual place where the two fronts had met.

He found it a few seconds later. Below the aircraft stretched a wide expanse of frozen marshland, separating Sinyavino and the lake. The marshes were dotted with occasional clumps of alder, their naked branches casting bluish shadows on the snow. It was here that the human streams flowing from east and west met and combined. Groups of excited, gesticulating people came together and rapidly swelled into crowds. The soldiers flung their arms round each other and kissed. Despite twenty degrees of frost they doffed their caps and tossed them into the air.

The pilots felt themselves infected by the spirit of these scenes. They circled again and again over that famous meeting-place, diving to tree-top level, soaring into the glittering heights.

The siege had been lifted! The noose that had been throttling Leningrad had been cut. The gates were open. Now, in addition to the Ice Road, there was an overland route to the city. Lunin suddenly noticed he was seeing badly. Was the hood freezing up? No, it was not that, it was his tears. So much agony, so many deaths, and now, at long last, this.... He rubbed his eyes with the back of his leather gauntlet and looked around.

How well he knew that low, marshy, southern shore of the lake, only just liberated from the Germans. There was the road through the forest, parallel with the coastline, along which, almost eighteen months ago, he had driven into Leningrad in that lorry with the empty petrol

tank in the back. Khovrin and he were probably the last people to use that road. And now it was free again and along it moved an endless column of tanks, lorries, guns and troops—all going to Leningrad.

Lunin took the squadron back to station. On landing he at once noticed that Kuznetsov's aircraft was still on the runway. So Kuznetsov had not gone up; he was waiting to be briefed. Taking Tatarenko with him, Lunin went to the dug-out of the regiment command post. He found there Uvarov, Proskuryakov, Yermakov, Shakhbazyan and Tararaksin. Kuznetsov sat in the corner, waiting for orders from Front H.Q.

Everybody had heard the news.

"See it?" asked Uvarov.

"Yes," said Lunin.

He had never been any good at describing anything, especially when he was excited. Tatarenko did it instead. His face glowed, his eyes and teeth shone. The merging of the two fronts, the soldiers rejoicing and hugging each other—all had made a tremendous impression on him.

"The Germans are counter-attacking," said Proskuryakov. "They're bringing up artillery. Hoping to break through to the lake again."

The telephone rang. Tararaksin took the receiver, listened carefully and then instructed Kuznetsov to fly at once and spot the location of German batteries south of the breach in the blockade.

Kuznetsov got up.

"May I leave, Comrade Division Commissar?" he asked Uvarov.

"Yes, off you go."

In two minutes Captain Shakhbazyan was in touch with Kuznetsov by radio.

"Taking off," Kuznetsov's voice came clearly over the loudspeaker in the dug-out.

A few minutes later he reported the coordinates of his observation area.

"That's a hell of a place to be," said Proskuryakov. "They're firing like lunatics."

"Battery near two-storey house on bank of stream," Kuznetsov reported.

Shakhbazyan made a note and marked the map.

"How's the flak?"

"As usual, Comrade Captain," replied Kuznetsov. "Battery near school to starboard. Over."

" 'As usual.' That means they're plastering him," whispered Proskuryakov.

"Battery on left bank of stream close to bridge," Kuznetsov reported.

Shakhbazyan wrote and made another mark on the map. "Battery on southern slope of height 116. Over."

"Two guns 100 yards left of factory. Over."

Shakhbazyan went on taking notes.

"Square five. Very powerful battery. Direction of aim—north-west. . . ."

The voice broke off. There was a long silence. Then everyone in the dug-out clearly heard Kuznetsov say: "The bastards. . . ."

And then something between a sigh and a groan.

Proskuryakov strode to the microphone, pushed Shakhbazyan aside and shouted:

"What's the matter, Kuznetsov? What's the matter?"

"Comrade Regiment Commander. . . ." came a hoarse, muffled voice. "Two batteries behind station . . . near water-tower . . . shooting. . . ."

The voice stopped short. Then, almost in a whisper: "Good-bye."

Tatarenko, all colour drained from his face, sprang up, overturning the bench. Standing beside Proskuryakov near the microphone he shouted:

"Anton! Anton!"

There was no reply.

Shakhbazyan was the first to break the silence.

"We must pass these positions on to Front H.Q."

He reached for the telephone.

"I'll do it," said Uvarov suddenly, picking up the sheet on which Shakhbazyan had been making notes.

Tararaksin connected him with Front H.Q.

"The general's on the line," he said, handing Uvarov the receiver.

In a calm, unhurried voice Uvarov read out to the artillery general a list of all the places where the German batteries were located.

"This information is accurate," he said, when he had come to the end. "It was obtained by Guards Junior Lieutenant Kuznetsov."

"Good," said the general. "We'll have a smack at those batteries straightaway."

"Make it hot, make it hot for them," said Uvarov, his fist tightening on the receiver. "Kuznetsov was dying when he gave us that information. He was killed three minutes ago over your targets. D'you understand, Comrade General?"

"I understand," said the general.

Uvarov and Lunin left the dug-out together. The cold, sunny, windless air vibrated with a powerful rumble. The guns were slamming the German batteries that Kuznetsov had spotted.

Uvarov and Lunin crossed nearly the whole airfield to the end of the runway without exchanging a word.

Lunin had to fly again.

It was only when he had reached his aircraft that he spoke.

"Ivan Ivanovich, will you recommend me for the Party?"

Uvarov looked at him hard.

"That goes without saying," he said.

5

Soon after the lifting of the siege the air regiment held a solemn celebration of the first anniversary of the day it had received its Guards colours. There were long preparations for the occasion to which everyone looked forward with impatience.

Among the pilots there were few who, twelve months earlier, had bent their knees before the banner and spoken the words of their oath for the first time. The rest knew of the event only as a tradition and referred to it as something that had taken place long, long ago, in the remote past. The year that had passed since then had been so full of events that it seemed to them longer than a century. They had been in the regiment no more than a few months but no one considered them as novices any more. They had grown up with the regiment, they were an inseparable part of it, they possessed that wealth of military experience which belonged to the regiment. They knew by heart the words of the Guards oath and in battle they had won the right to utter them. So it was decided that the entire regiment should repeat the oath on the day of the anniversary.

By chance that was the day Sonya paid her first visit to Slava. Slava had arranged this with her long before and that morning had walked to the tram terminus to meet her. He had obtained permission to invite his sister from the regiment commander himself; no special pass was required because strangers were barred entry only to the wired-off airfield; anyone could go to the bungalows where the pilots lived.

Sonya decided to visit Slava only after much hesitation which surprised and even worried him. He could not make out why she should be hesitating. In fact the reason was quite simple: she had nothing suitable to wear. She was still going to work in those overalls with a jersey underneath and her old coat with the sleeves that were too short on top, and her feet stuck into a pair of felt boots. She had

definitely grown out of all the clothes her mother had once made for her and was too thin to wear any of her mother's own clothes: Mummy's skirts just slid off her. And she had nothing decent to wear on her feet and her stockings had been darned dozens of times. Without telling Slava the reason she had quite made up her mind not to go. But when the girls in her team found that out they insisted that she should go at all costs. One of them lent her a blouse, another a skirt, a third a pair of shoes, and in this way, by their joint efforts, they decked her out for the trip.

There was a hard frost that day and Sonya felt very cold in the tram. But Slava, waiting for her at the terminus, felt even colder. When they met they at once broke into a run to warm themselves up and they ran without stopping all the way to the bungalows where the pilots lived.

There Sonya suddenly lost heart.

"Oh Slava," she said, "let's go and sit somewhere by ourselves. I don't want anybody to see me."

"Don't be silly," said Slava. "What d'you mean, not see you? I've told them all you're coming."

He first took her to the house where he lived with Lunin. In the entry they met Khromykh carrying a broom.

"Is the Guards Major in?" asked Slava.

"No, he's at the station."

"Has he been gone long?"

"No, just left."

"I told you to come earlier," Slava said to Sonya reproachfully. "Now, of course, they're all at the station. They'll soon be parading and taking the oath. You won't be allowed at the parade and, of course, I won't go without you," he added in a voice that expressed both his willingness to sacrifice himself for Sonya and his regret at having to do so. "This is our Khromykh."

Sonya drew off her mitten and held out her hand. Khromykh shifted his broom from his right hand to his left and shook hands with her.

"This is my sister," Slava explained.

"I can see that," said Khromykh.

"The one I told you about."

"I know. Come in and get warm."

Slava led Sonya along the short dark passage into the room he shared with Lunin.

"Is he a pilot?" Sonya whispered, touching Slava on the shoulder.

"Who? Khromykh? No, he's Konstantin Ignatyevich's orderly. He's a grand chap. He was Rassokhin's orderly, too."

Slava and Lunin lived in a small clean room with a painted floor, a low ceiling and a tiny frosted window. There were two iron beds, neatly made, a table in the window and two chairs.

"Take your coat off, it's warm in here," said Slava. "This is my bed, and that's where Konstantin Ignatyevich sleeps."

Sonya untied her woollen shawl, unbuttoned her coat, sat on a chair and looked around. Well, she had not expected to find military men living like this. Why, the room was tidier than the one she usually spent the night in with the girls from her team.

"Does that orderly tidy up for you?" she asked, remembering the broom Khromykh had been carrying.

"Oh no," said Slava. "Khromykh only sweeps the porch and the entry. Konstantin Ignatyevich is a funny fellow, you see, he won't let anybody clean up for him. He makes his own bed, like I do. He gets angry if Khromykh starts sweeping in here. He only lets me do it because, after all, I live here. I light the stove and sweep the floor. I can't let him do it; after all, he's the squadron leader."

"That's very good, if you're telling the truth," said Sonya approvingly. "Isn't he married?"

"No."

"Ah, that's why he has learned to look after himself."

They were warmer now and Slava tried to persuade Sonya to come with him to the pilots' cabin. They might

catch somebody in. Sonya assured him she was quite happy where she was. She found on the table the exercise books which Slava used in his studies with Deyev; she started turning over the pages and making remarks that were not altogether complimentary to Slava. That, however, only increased Slava's eagerness to get her out of the room.

"You're our guest," he said. "You've got to do everything our way, not yours."

A few minutes later they were climbing the steps of Two Squadron's cabin. Here Sonya quite lost heart. She stopped and whispered: "Go in by yourself. I'll wait here."

Slava ran into the cabin and came back at once to say that nobody was in.

"Come in. I'll show you how they live."

Gingerly, trying not to make a noise with her feet or slam the door, Sonya went in.

"Do they sleep here?" she asked in surprise.

"Of course," said Slava, not understanding her surprise.

Sonya would not have been able to explain it herself. It was just that everything was different from what she had imagined. Those beds standing there so peacefully with their white pillows and the clean towels hanging on the rails. The lockers with the boxes of tooth powder on them, and the photographs and books and even looking-glasses and reels of thread. Shabby chests and small suitcases tied up with straps and cord. A children's set of dominoes in a box on the table. And not a weapon to be seen. Nothing military. Yet here lived men, soldiers, fighters.

She tiptoed over to the *Battle Sheet* that hung on the wall. Under the printed heading big handwritten letters announced that Guards Junior Lieutenant Kuznetsov, Anton Ivanovich, had been awarded the decoration—Hero of the Soviet Union.

"Will you show me who he is?" Sonya asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"He was killed. They decorated him afterwards. Posthumously, they call it."

Only then did Sonya notice the black border to the entire *Battle Sheet* and an article with the headline "In Memory of a Friend."

"Did he live here?"

"That's his bed."

Sonya was standing near Kuznetsov's bed.

"Who sleeps here now?"

"No one yet."

Shocked and silent Sonya followed Slava out of the cabin.

Outside they met Yermakov hurrying to the airfield. Slava came to attention and saluted.

"Comrade Commissar, may I present my sister?"

Yermakov shook Sonya's hand and looked at her searchingly.

"You're not leaving right away, are you?" he asked with a smile. "You must excuse me, I'm in a hurry. We'll have a chance for a chat later. Meanwhile go and have dinner."

He scribbled a chit for the air-crew mess on a page of his notebook. Handing it to Slava he nodded to Sonya and went on.

Slava did not often take his dinner in the air-crew mess. He usually ate with the men of the station battalion.

"Come on, come on, Hilda will find something for us," he said to Sonya, grasping her by the arm to hurry her on.

Sonya felt shy and hesitated.

"I don't feel like eating at all," she fibbed.

"Don't be a silly. Come on. They always have rissoles in the air-crew mess."

The mechanics' mess was on the ground floor, the air-crew mess upstairs. Slava led Sonya up the wooden staircase. There was no one in the mess except Hilda.

"This is my sister, Hilda."

Hilda nodded and smiled. She sat them at a corner table and served them with soup.

"Isn't she pretty?" whispered Sonya when Hilda had gone. "I suppose everyone's in love with her."

Slava was surprised. It had never occurred to him to wonder whether Hilda was pretty or not.

"Nobody's in love with her," he said. "But she's simply pining away for Ilyusha Tatarenko."

"How do you know that?"

"Everybody knows that," said Slava with assurance as he stirred mustard into his soup, like a real man.

"What about him? Is he in love with her?"

"Doesn't look at her, even."

"Well, that's very wrong of him," said Sonya. "She's lovely. He ought to be in love with her."

Hilda brought them the next dish and walked to the window. Usually, one could see the airfield from this window, but now it was iced-up as far as the middle and Hilda had to stand on tiptoes to see anything. Two other girls popped their heads out of the kitchen.

"Has it started?" they asked.

Hilda nodded. The girls ran to the window, raised themselves as high as they could but, being shorter than Hilda, could see nothing. Then they climbed on to the window-sill. After a moment's hesitation Hilda did the same.

"It's begun," said Slava.

Stuffing a rissole into his mouth he dashed to the window and stuck his head between the girls' skirts. But he could see nothing.

Then he went over to Sonya.

"Listen, Sonya, you sit here. . . . I can't miss it, I mustn't. It only happens once a year. I'll run there and come back in a few minutes."

"What, are you going to leave me by myself?" exclaimed Sonya.

"You sit here. You'll be perfectly all right. Hilda's here."

"No, that's not nice, Slava. After all, I'm your visitor."

"I'll come back. Everybody will come here. Oh, don't be angry, I won't be long."

He flew down the stairs.

The regiment was lined up. A frosty sun shone huge over the airfield. The entire personnel of the three squadrons, forming two even ranks—mechanics at the back, pilots in front—stood out darkly against the snow. The men's eyebrows were grey with frost. Clouds of vapour curled from their lips.

And then, finally, came the long-awaited moment. Proskuryakov took the colours from the hands of the standard-bearer and dropped on one knee. With an easy, firm, concerted movement the whole regiment adopted the same posture.

Then Proskuryakov repeated the words he had used a year before:

"Our country, hear our voice. Today we take a sacred oath of allegiance to you."

Lunin, kneeling in front of his squadron, felt his heart leap as he heard those words. He could not see his pilots but he heard them repeat the words of the oath after Proskuryakov—firmly, distinctly, audibly. He himself was repeating those familiar words for the second time but for them it was the first. By the tension and faint catch in their young, resonant voices he could feel that the oath meant as much to them as to him.

"We shall carry the red banner of the Soviet Guards through the tempest of the Patriotic War to the great day of victory," the kneeling regiment intoned with earnest feeling after their commander, and the word "victory" resounded sternly in the frosty air.

They had had a taste of victory. Victory was no longer a mere dream, a desire, something that lay entirely in the future, a hope still to be fulfilled. They had already seen victory, they had taken part in it themselves. Only a few miles away lay that huge, glorious city from which the noose had just been snatched. Victory!

The enemy were still strong, still presumptuous. They were still lodged in the Crimea, in the Ukraine and Byelorussia. Though the ring around Leningrad had been breached, they still occupied positions on the south-west edge of the city and were still shelling it daily with heavy artillery. A long, long road still lay ahead, great sacrifices would have to be borne, an enormous task awaited fulfilment.

But victory would come. That bright day would dawn. Already it gleamed on the edge of the sky.

The great turning-point had arrived.

"Regiment! To the colours, 'shun!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Battle Over the Sea

1

During dinner Sonya met all Slava's pilot friends. When the men flocked into the mess she felt shy and wanted to leave, but they practically forced her to stay. The dinner was a special one, with meat pasty, and they made her eat a big slice although she had already finished her dinner. Afterwards Uvarov paid a surprise visit to the mess.

"Hullo, friend," he said, catching sight of Sonya.

He spoke to the men about the Guards colours—briefly but solemnly and, Sonya thought, very well. Then the tables were pushed back, a young sailor struck up on the accordion and dancing began. The pilots wore blue naval tunics and black, well-pressed trousers; their boots were brushed to a high polish and their brass buttons, rings and medals (they all had them) shone brightly. A young man whom Sonya took to be a pilot, too, but who turned out to be a doctor, brought a gramophone and the party grew even gayer.

Sonya received pressing invitations to dance but she declined them with equal stubbornness, assuring everybody that she did not know how to. That was true: she had danced a little before the war at school, with her girl class-mates, but that couldn't be called dancing and, anyway, it was such a long time ago. One of the most persistent of her would-be partners was a funny little fellow called Karyakin whom Sonya liked very much; he was so marvellously bright and cheerful. He squatted on his heels and danced round her, snapping his fingers loudly; he seized her hand and drew her into the middle of the floor but Sonya broke loose and ran off into a corner, laughing and embarrassed.

Sonya was not the only girl. She noticed that the others were dressed no more smartly than she and this consoled her somewhat. They all danced, and best of all danced Hilda. That evening Sonya never stopped marvelling at Hilda's beauty—she had never seen such beauty except in pictures. Hilda put Lovely Nyura of the Komsomol team entirely in the shade.

Lunin was in the mess, too. He, of course, did not join in the dancing. He stood at the side among the older people, but Sonya often caught his kindly attentive glance. He smiled encouragement at her and she smiled back.

One pilot—tall and dark-haired, with very white teeth—stood near Sonya and kept looking her way. She crossed

to the opposite corner but he went on staring. Soon he came over to her. He seemed timid and could not make up his mind to speak to her.

"Why aren't you dancing?" she asked.

"I don't know how to," he said.

"Like me."

"Worse than you."

She laughed.

"How d'you know?"

"You'll see. Let's try," he said.

She had no time to refuse. He carefully put his arm round her waist and they turned uncertainly and shyly in a waltz.

"You're Sonya, I know that," he said.

"That's right," she said, looking at his blushing face. "What's your name?"

"Ilya."

"Are you Tatarenko?"

"Yes."

"I imagined you quite differently."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. I thought of you as smaller, younger. Like Slava. He said you were friends."

"That's correct. We are."

Sonya danced with Tatarenko the whole evening. She had never felt so gay in her life. Both of them plucked up courage and they took the floor for every dance; and they seemed to manage as well as anybody else. Sonya forgot about everything, she didn't even notice the others. Once or twice, though, she caught Lunin's eye. He looked a bit sad and that upset her for a moment or two. But as she span and leaped she soon forgot both Lunin's glances and her own worries.

She came back to reality only when one of Tatarenko's comrades drew him aside and he left her for the first time that evening. Slava, she discovered, had gone to bed long ago. She started—it was time for her to be off. She had no

night pass; the last tram would leave soon. She hurried out to look for her coat.

In the hall she bumped into Lunin.

"Somebody had better put you on the tram," he said. "I'll just get my coat."

"Oh no, Konstantin Ignatyevich. There's no need. I'll get there all right by myself."

Tatarenko dashed into the hall. He stopped when he saw Sonya and Lunin.

Lunin, who had just taken his coat off the hanger, glanced at Tatarenko, smiled and hung it up again.

"See her to the tram, Ilya," he said.

"Why, Comrade Guards Major!"

But Lunin had already turned and left.

Tatarenko did not look for his own coat, he did not bother even to take his cap. Sonya was horrified.

"You'll catch cold. It's freezing hard."

But he assured her he never felt the cold and that it was not freezing. Actually, it was a little warmer outside and snow was falling lightly. Somewhere behind the clouds the moon was floating and in its faint light Sonya could see the snow-flakes settling on Tatarenko's dark curly head. They ran all the way to the tram terminus, laughing all the time. But when Sonya got into the tram and stood on the platform in the blue light of the little electric lamp Tatarenko grew silent and sad.

The tram jerked and started.

"Good-bye," said Tatarenko.

"Good-bye," said Sonya, waving her mittened hand.

He vanished in the darkness. She stayed on the platform: she enjoyed the wind and wanted to be alone. The tram jangled on, gathering speed. Suddenly she heard rapid, firm, ringing steps: someone was running after the tram. It was he. Grasping the brass handrail Tatarenko leaped on to the step at full speed.

"That's the way to get killed," Sonya exclaimed.

"I wanted to say good-bye again."

The night streets were empty; the tram hurtled on at top speed.

"Don't you dare jump," Sonya called. "It's very slippery here. Wait for the next stop."

But he had already jumped and vanished.

Sonya attained great proficiency with the welding torch. To her own surprise she found she had acquired a trade, moreover, a highly respected trade of which there was great need. Thanks to this trade no one considered her a child any more. She was known and considered in the district as an experienced old welder. Quite elderly men and women asked her advice as if she were a specialist, a foreman.

The Komsomol team in which Sonya had started work no longer existed. Although the breach in the blockade was narrow and the enemy still stood right up against the edge of the city, although the artillery bombardment grew stronger and stronger, every day saw the opening of new factories. Along the southern shore of Lake Ladoga, a few miles from the front, a railway line had been built and by this route trainloads of supplies and fuels were brought into Leningrad. And through that narrow breach—the result of the winter fighting—current from the Volkhov power-station was transmitted by the new high-tension line. The Germans were still only a few miles from the centre of the city but Leningrad lived a well-regulated working life, the smoke-stacks smoked and the machine tools whirred. And the girls of the Komsomol team went to work in the factories.

The district Soviet, however, did not let Sonya go off to factory work. There was much repair work to be done in the district and it all needed the presence of a welder. The water-mains, the drains, the heating system had to be repaired; iron roof-girders had to be strengthened. With a group of fitters, plumbers and roofers Sonya worked

where she was sent by the district Soviet. Her companions were either girls a little older or boys a little younger than she. Sonya was held in special esteem among them because a welder is someone who handles a complicated tool, not just a mere plumber or roofer.

They had to work very hard—from dawn till dusk, without a day off. But they worked with the zest and enthusiasm of youth. The work made them happy because it was so obviously and undoubtedly useful. They were delighted when, as the result of several weeks of persevering work, search, doubts, thought and hopes, the water began to flow again in the pipes of an entire block of huge abandoned buildings. They felt happy to be bringing the dead back to life, to be making something that had been destroyed work again for the benefit of man.

The longer Sonya worked as a welder the more she liked it. At first she had been attracted by the outward side: the protective goggles, the showers of sparks, the mysterious blue light. But as she worked she gradually got to know metal and soon she found metal much more interesting than sparks and blue light. She had known nothing about metal before and had never guessed how highly complicated and varied it was. Hard, unyielding, heavy, it became soft and pliable and obedient when you knew its secrets. Sonya did not know those secrets; all she knew were a few elementary rules of thumb. But she knew there existed a vast sphere of human activity called metallurgy. That's what she ought to study. She ought to devote her whole life to metals as her grandfather had devoted his to rivers and lakes.

"There's no need for you to decide anything yet," said Antonina Trofimovna. "First you must complete your schooling. I know it was out of the question last year, but those times have passed. Even that Slava of yours is studying."

"But I'm working, Antonina Trofimovna. How can I drop my work now?"

"We'll have to think about it," said Antonina Trofimovna. "We'll find some way. I'll raise the matter."

Antonina Trofimovna still worked on the district Party committee and her relations with Sonya were the same as when Sonya had worked in the Komsomol team. Sonya grasped every opportunity to run to Antonina Trofimovna's office for a chat. Sometimes she found there her old friends of the team who, like her, had not been able to get out of the habit of pouring out their hearts to Antonina Trofimovna.

A few days later Antonina Trofimovna said to Sonya:

"Tell me, d'you think you could study on your own?" And, not awaiting an answer, she went on: "Children can't study on their own. Only grown-ups can do that, and far from all of them. It takes a lot of will-power. You'll work and study, too. D'you think you can do it? Could you manage to prepare yourself for the leaving exams?"

"How will I find the time?"

"You'll be given the time, I've arranged that and I'll see that it's done."

"There's maths.... I'll find it hard to cope with maths on my own."

"H'm, you'll be no good as a metallurgist without maths. Well, I'll help you with your maths. Before the war at our spinning-mill I coached three girls in algebra. They passed the leaving exams. If I'm too busy during the day, come in the evenings after ten."

So Sonya started studying. Antonina Trofimovna helped her to get textbooks and drew up a curriculum for her. The curriculum provided her with a detailed schedule for mastering the different subjects. That, too, had been worked out by Antonina Trofimovna. So Sonya's life was henceforth divided between the welding torch and her textbooks.

She was always short of time, especially at first. The people in charge of her work sympathized with her desire

to study and tried to help her, but the district needed her work.

After frequent interventions by Antonina Trofimovna it was finally decided that Sonya should find and train a substitute for herself and that when this substitute had mastered the art of welding they should work alternate shifts.

Sonya always worked with some sort of mate. Sometimes she even had two and then she felt herself to be a real foreman. There was a time when Sonya herself had been mate to that lad who had taught her to handle the welding torch, and, remembering him, she always tried to impart to her mates all her knowledge and knack.

She had endless trouble with these mates. At first she got girls who were not in the least interested in welding and who unaccountably took fright at the sight of the flame of the welding torch. But later she was given a girl of her own age who because of her appearance was known as Tiny Tonya. She really was exceptionally small and thin and looked about twelve. Traces of long undernourishment lay in her small anaemic face—she had been bedridden for over six months and nobody thought she would ever get up again. But she recovered and went to work and her thin childlike hands were nimble and deft. She considered welding a noble and enthralling occupation. She was delighted and full of gratitude to be given a chance of learning to become Sonya's relief.

The conditions in which Sonya had to teach Tonya were not ideal—they worked in a wooden cradle hanging from the arch of a bridge which had been damaged by German shell-fire. The cradle rocked in the wind, martins darted under their feet, and the river down below, only just freed from ice, looked terribly deep, bottomless. Sonya's head swam and everything would go black before her eyes, she felt wildly frightened by the abyss that yawned under the thin planks on which she had to stand with her heavy, bulky equipment. Her voice would falter, her movements

lose assurance and her thoughts wander, but, all the same, the work had to be done and she had to explain everything to Tonya and, above all, conceal from her mate her own fear, because Tonya herself seemed to be quite fearless. She would slide into the cradle down the rope from the bridge and sit with her legs dangling over giddy space.

Well, the pilots had much more space under them, Sonya reflected in an attempt to muster up her courage. And nowadays they were flying mostly over the sea.

Since that visit to the station on the day of the anniversary celebration, Sonya kept thinking of the pilots. Wherever she was, whatever she was looking at, she found her thoughts dwelling on them. It happened automatically, without her wanting it.

She went on seeing Tatarenko occasionally. Twice she had gone to the station to see Slava, and Tatarenko, learning of her arrival, had dashed over to greet her. He was always very busy at the station and could spend only a few minutes with her. When they met in town, though, they had more time together.

Those meetings started when, one day in mid-May, Lunin brought Tatarenko to see her.

They turned up towards the end of the day when Sonya, who had eaten a late lunch at the canteen of the district Soviet, had returned home and laid out her lesson books before her on the kitchen-table. Tonya had done so well in mastering the art of welding that she could now be trusted with the gun. They worked alternate shifts now: Sonya in the mornings, Tonya in the afternoons. Sonya decided to sit over her books until late that night—she had carefully calculated how much she had to learn. But hearing the bell and opening the door to find Lunin and Tatarenko on the threshold, she clean forgot about her intentions.

Lunin had come to town on business. The regiment engineer had taken him to the stores to show him several

new instruments which he intended installing in the aircraft. Tatarenko had asked to be allowed to accompany them: he, too, was interested in the instruments; moreover, he wanted to see Leningrad. For several months he had lived just outside it but he did not know the city at all and had hardly ever seen it.

They drove in the regiment staff car to the stores, which were on Vasilyevsky Island near the harbour. After inspecting the instruments the engineer drove off on his own and Lunin and Tatarenko set out on a stroll through the streets. They arranged to be picked up by the engineer in the evening.

"I can't show him anything for the simple reason that I don't know anything about Leningrad myself," Lunin said to Sonya. "Perhaps you'd act as his guide, if you've got time. I'll stay here and take things easy for a little."

He began telling her about Slava. Tatarenko looked shyly around the flat. The books in the study made a great impression on him. A whole wall of books, from floor to ceiling.

"Are those your books?" he asked Sonya.

"They're Daddy's," she replied.

He looked at the shelves with respect. It was the first time in his life that he had seen so many books belonging to one person.

Sonya knew and loved Leningrad, but never had it looked to her so breath-takingly lovely as on that cool, clear evening when she walked for the first time with Ilya Tatarenko over its bridges, through its parks, along its embankments. And, indeed, Leningrad was perhaps at no time in its existence so beautiful as in that May of 1943. Poised between water and sky, bathed in the light of white nights that is at once the light of sunset and sunrise, austere, empty as if under a fairy's spell, it glittered with the solemn glory of victory. It was itself the victor and victory lay reflected in each of its stones, in every splinter of glass in its shattered windows, on the faces of every one of

the rare passers-by. "Victory, victory," rang from the heels of the girls clattering along the pavements, and there was the pride of victory on the faces of the children playing again in the city squares, and screwing up their eyes with contempt for the German shells passing overhead. The verdure that had but recently come to the parks and gardens had never been so lush; fresh, tender, ungovernable, the grass covered every inch of ground, splashing in waves of green against the stones of the houses and the palaces, and it seemed as if every blade of grass, every stem was gathering force in an effort to express the triumph of truth over falsehood, of life over death.

Sonya showed Tatarenko the University, the Exchange, the Rostral Columns, the Admiralty. The front of the Admiralty that faces the park was all pitted with shrapnel scars but swallows had already built their nests in the scars and hung high above the tree-tops like a floating net. Sonya showed Tatarenko the Winter Palace and led him into the middle of Palace Square to the foot of the Alexander Column; he looked for a long time at the semicircle of the Grand Staff building.

"Wasn't it from there that the storming of the Winter Palace was launched? In 1917?"

"Yes, that's where they started."

"Where did the *Aurora* lie?"

"Just over there, see?"

The steps of the Winter Palace had been damaged by shell-fire and a shell had chipped one of the Titans supporting the portico over the entrance to the Hermitage. Sonya showed Tatarenko the Winter Canal, Marsovo Polye, with its monument to revolutionary martyrs, the Engineers' Castle in which the Emperor Paul was strangled, as well as Peter the Great's little house in the Summer Gardens. Tatarenko listened to her without taking his eyes off her. How lightly she walked. He noticed every movement of her brows, every flicker of her eyelashes, every shrug of her shoulders, every intonation of her

voice. He was amazed at the extent of her knowledge. He, too, was interested in history but he knew much less than she. He muddled up the tsars. Which Catherine was it that had been Peter the Great's wife? Whose son was Paul?

Occasionally she asked him questions about flying and air battles but he replied vaguely and reluctantly. "Oh, we fly, and sometimes we have to fight." He wanted to listen, not to talk, that was obvious. Only on the way back over the bridge when Sonya drew his attention to the sunset which embraced the entire northern sky did he suddenly say:

"Oh, that's nothing to the sunsets we see."

"When? Where?"

"When we're flying. At about 8,000 yards, say. The whole world is on fire and you fly through the flames. If only you could see it one day."

It had grown late and when they returned to the flat they found that Lunin had left without waiting for Tatarenko. The engineer must have come for him. Tatarenko would have to hurry if he were not to miss the last tram.

"Come and see us," he said to Sonya.

"It'd be better if you came here."

"I will but I don't know when. There's a lot of flying. If we get a quiet day I'll ask the Guards major for permission."

"Who? Konstantin Ignatyevich?"

Tatarenko nodded.

"D'you like him?" Sonya asked. "He's nice, isn't he?"

"I should say so!" exclaimed Tatarenko. "They don't make 'em better."

"Yes, I know he's a wonderful man," said Sonya. "You can tell that by the way he treats Slava."

From then on Tatarenko started visiting Sonya from time to time—once every ten days or so and always towards the end of the day. He could not let her know in advance and would turn up unexpectedly, but he always found her in because at that time of the day she was sure

to be at her studies. At the sound of the bell Sonya would fling open the door and meet him with radiant face. They would leave together at once and stroll about the city.

It was the season of white nights; every day the sun set later and with more splendour. They always chose new places for their walks and little by little covered most of the city, from end to end. They talked about the buildings, about history, about plays and books. Tatarenko was specially interested in Lenin and the events of the October Revolution, and Sonya showed him the square in front of Finland Station where Lenin, on his return to the city, had addressed the people from the roof of an armoured car, and the street on the Petrograd Side where Lenin had lived in 1917, and the Kshesinskaya Palace with the balcony from which Lenin made so many speeches, and the Smolny.

Sonya had been to the theatre much more often than Tatarenko and had read more books, too. During their walks she used to give him long detailed accounts of whole plays with descriptions of the productions, and he would listen to her with the greatest attention. He respected her knowledge of books tremendously. However, it was clear that his self-esteem was wounded for he did not like to be surpassed in anything. Whenever Sonya mentioned a book he had not read, he would write the title and the name of the author in his notebook and say tight-lipped: "I shall read it."

One day, in the second half of June, while walking on the islands where there was not a soul in sight and the undergrowth was wild and lush and moist, they found a little place in one of the channels in the Neva delta where rowing boats were on hire. These boats, it turned out, were intended for officers on short leave. Tatarenko was a full lieutenant by now—he and all his comrades had been promoted immediately after the siege had been lifted. New gold-braided shoulder-straps with a blue stripe between the bars—they had only just been introduced and

suited him very well—flashed on the shoulders of his navy-blue tunic. However, there was a note of timidity in his voice when he asked the sergeant in charge of the boats whether he could hire one. The sergeant brought oars and rowlocks and they set off rowing.

Tatarenko rowed, Sonya steered. They went among the islands from channel to channel trying to find the quietest and narrowest. The multi-coloured evening sky was reflected in the water, branches hung low over the boat. Suddenly six Stormoviks with red stars on their wings swept low overhead.

"They're off to storm the German batteries at Strelna," said Tatarenko, listening to the dying roar of the aircraft.

It was only a few miles to Strelna from where they were in the Neva delta and in the still air they clearly heard the attack begin. There were thunderous explosions, the crack of anti-aircraft guns and then the batteries fell silent. A few minutes later the Stormoviks again flew over the rowing boat—in the opposite direction.

The boat drifted slowly down to the sea. A vast sunset, filling half the sky, hung over the smooth glassy waters of the Marquis Pool. Sonya laughed suddenly.

"I was thinking, if only I could have a dress made of that sunset," she said. "Silly, aren't I? All the same what a dress it would make."

Tatarenko smiled.

"Happy?" he asked.

"Yes. Are you?"

"Yes. No, not very."

"Why not?"

"Because we're leaving."

Sonya did not understand.

"Leaving? Where are you going?"

He explained that it was the squadron that was leaving. When, no one knew, but it would certainly be soon. And where, that was also unknown.

"Far?" she asked.

"Maybe not very far," he said, "but I probably won't be able to come to town."

She at once grasped the meaning of those words. Their meetings would have to end. They would soon part and for how long no one knew.

They had never mentioned their feelings for each other. They had not dared even to touch that subject. But Sonya's happiness faded; she became thoughtful. They lost interest in their excursion, returned to the landing-stage, handed the boat over and walked away silently in the gathering dusk. From time to time her shoulder touched his. As they drew near the house he asked:

"Will you write to me?"

She nodded.

They stood for a long time at the entrance to the house; they could not part.

"Will we see each other again?" she asked.

He could not be sure. He knew that when they were transferred it usually happened at short notice. The order came and within an hour they would be at a new station. But, of course, he would do his best to say good-bye to her.

"If I can't come I'll let you know."

"How?"

"Through Slava. Konstantin Ignatyevich is bound to let him come and say good-bye to you. Slava will tell you and you'll come. All right?"

"I'll come."

Still they could not part. She walked with him to the tram stop. They discovered that the last tram had gone. He jumped into a passing lorry and Sonya hurried home as fast as she could go: she had no night pass and might run into a patrol.

A whole week passed and there was not a word from Tatarenko. However, Sonya knew that the squadron had not left because she had two visits from Slava that week.

When he appeared, Sonya waited in suspense to see whether he had any message for her. But he did not even mention Tatarenko and certainly had no idea that the squadron was to be transferred to another station in the very near future.

He learned of the transfer on the day it was to take place, when Lunin sent him to say good-bye to his sister, telling him to be back in three hours at the latest. Slava arrived at the flat excited and talkative. He told Sonya that he was going to live on an island in the middle of the sea.

"I'm going to fly there in a transport aircraft with Deyev," he said. "The whole ground staff is being flown by transport planes. Oh, I love flying. When I flew across Lake Ladoga the last time, one of our seamen was sick but I didn't feel the least bit sick. Listen, Sonya," he blurted, "Tatarenko asked me to tell you to come back with me on the No. 10 tram. He'll wait for you at the terminus. He's not allowed to come to town but he'll run to the terminus. Oh, you're blushing, you're blushing," he shouted triumphantly.

Sonya was certainly blushing. Her cheeks, her forehead, her neck, her ears had all turned bright pink.

"You silly, I'm not blushing at all. Why should I?"

"Everybody knows. Everybody's talking about it," hooted Slava, dancing around her.

"What are they talking about?"

"That you're in love with Tatarenko. That you're taking him away from Hilda."

Sonya blazed with indignation.

"Me? Taking him away? That's not true."

"It's true, it's true. Are you coming with me?"

"No, I'm not."

"Oh, stop it. He'll be waiting for you. I promised him I'd bring you for certain."

"I'm not going."

And she did not.

2

In summer 1943, the westernmost salient on the vast line of the front stretching from the Arctic Ocean to the Black Sea, the westernmost outpost where the crimson flag of the Soviets fluttered, was a small island in the Gulf of Finland, lying some tens of miles west of Kronstadt. In clear weather a good pair of eyes could see from the island the blue strips of the distant coastlines—to the north the shores of the Karelian Isthmus which were in Finnish hands, to the south the coast of the German-occupied Leningrad Region. And so this island-wedge between the Finns and the Germans was, as it were, behind the enemy's front.

At the beginning of the war neither the Germans nor the Finns seemed to attach much importance to this little island. They realized that it would not be easy to gain possession of it because there was a long-range shore battery there. And, anyway, it was no hindrance to their advance on Leningrad along either coast of the Gulf of Finland. As long as the Luftwaffe was strong enough the Germans limited themselves to constant bombing of the island and to practically cutting it off from Kronstadt.

However, as the balance of forces changed on land, sea and in the air, so did the situation of the island. There were still Finns to the north, Germans to the south of it, but the island no longer resembled a place cut off and under siege, but, rather, a firm, sharp wedge jammed deeply into the enemy's lines. It cut his communications, it opened a way deep into his positions, it created a constant threat both for the Germans and the Finns.

This low island looked like the top of a long sand-bank, quite flat and only just above the level of the sea. It was clothed in pine-trees from end to end. But they were not the tall shapely pines that grow in the forest. Here they grew amidst the sea, exposed to all winds, and the winds had moulded them into fantastic shapes, bending their

crowns tortuously and twisting their long branches. No two trees were alike and among the grey rocks in the leaden mists that nearly always enveloped the island they resembled a pack of strange monsters.

There was not a single habitation on the island. The few fishermen's shanties that had stood there before the war had been smashed to smithereens or burned to ashes by bombs; even their stoves had disappeared without trace. The fine pale sand which covered the island was pitted with crumbling-edged craters of all sizes; the crooked trunks of many of the pine-trees had been split by bomb-splinters. The island appeared to be uninhabited. But an attentive eye could pick out here and there a little cloud of blue smoke hanging among the tree trunks in the humid air, or the entrance to a dug-out, or an iron rail meant to be struck for air-raid warnings, or an anti-aircraft gun camouflaged with pine boughs. The guns of the shore battery were hard to see, too—they were concealed by enormous grey boulders of natural granite.

In the summer of 1943 an air strip was constructed on the island. It looked so much like an ordinary forest glade that the inexperienced eye might not have recognized it as an air strip. Only the sight of the piles of stones heaped up under the trees could convey how much labour had been required to clear that glade and make it fit for aircraft to use.

In July when, far away in the heart of Russia, the great battle known later as the Battle of the Kursk Salient was being fought, the fighter squadron that Lunin commanded took up its station on that little island in the Gulf of Finland, on that air strip between the twisted pines.

The Germans felt their presence straightaway, from the very first day. On that day a Junkers reconnaissance aircraft was shot down.

For several weeks past, this Junkers had been making

daily flights over the island, probably to photograph it. Out of respect for the anti-aircraft guns it did not come lower than 9,000 feet. It came over at this altitude on the day the squadron reached the island. All the anti-aircraft guns were blazing away at it but the aircraft, knowing itself to be out of their reach, circled slowly and calmly over the little island.

One pair went up to chase the Junkers—Tatarenko and Ostrosablin. The Junkers, noticing the Soviet fighters climbing steeply, flew off westwards as fast as it could go. It took the pair three minutes to catch it up. The Junkers could, of course, have been shot down immediately, over the open sea. But Tatarenko had another idea. Leading Ostrosablin he overtook the German aircraft, attacked it from the west, forced it to turn and chased it ahead of him eastwards, back towards the island. Then Tatarenko and Ostrosablin forced it down. The clumsy bomber with the sinister crosses on its wing-tips swept with a sullen howl over the tops of the twisted pines. Amusing himself by making it change course at least fifteen times Tatarenko at length caught the Junkers on one of its turns and brought it down in the sea some two hundred yards from the island amidst the applause and cheers of the delighted gunners.

And to tell the truth, Tatarenko had only done it to delight the gunners. As old inhabitants of the island these gunners considered themselves the masters of the place. They had met the airmen somewhat distrustfully and made them feel they did not expect much good from them. But everything altered after Tatarenko and Ostrosablin brought that Junkers down under their very eyes. The pilots became citizens with equal rights and, despite the fact that they were newcomers, at once commanded respect.

The destruction of the Junkers reconnaissance aircraft did not rob the Germans of the desire to find out what was happening on the island. On the contrary, it only increased their uneasy curiosity. They were obviously much

concerned about the place. They sent one aircraft after another to reconnoitre. At first Lunin's men found German reconnaissance aircraft in the air several times a day and chased them off. The Germans became increasingly cautious, stealing up to the island either with the sun behind them or in some cloud or wisp of mist, or else maintaining a height of twenty or twenty-five thousand feet, although from such a height they were unable to spot a thing. But these manoeuvres did not save them either. From their island base the squadron made the whole air space for many miles around inaccessible to German aircraft.

However, chasing reconnaissance aircraft was not the principal task of the squadron. Not for that had they landed at the inconvenient little air strip on this island far in advance of the front. The squadron's chief task was to escort Soviet bombers and Stormoviks on operations against enemy ships and bases in the central and western parts of the Gulf of Finland.

The bombers and Stormoviks could stay in the air without refuelling much longer than the fighters; consequently, the fighters were unable to escort them the whole way. If the fighters were to take off from the same station as the Stormoviks they would have to abandon them halfway. There would have been no sense in that sort of escort because the Stormoviks and bombers that had been sent deep into the rear of the enemy needed protection not at the early stages but precisely at the end of their outward flight. Hence the value of that little patch of sand in the middle of the Gulf of Finland, west of Kronstadt. Flights of Stormoviks and bombers went as far as the island without escort, but from there on they had the protection of the fighters who escorted them all the way to their targets.

From the first glint of dawn till the last afterglow of sunset the squadron was on duty at their station where through the twisted red trunks of the pines the sea glittered on all sides. The pilots listened, listened all day. And

they would hear, coming from the east, the even throb of many engines, and then, quite low over the island, there would pass, flat against the sky, the huge aircraft with the red stars on their wing-tips—Petlyakovs or Ilyushins. The fighters would take off in a flash. And that would be the start of a devastating raid of Hamina, or Kotka, or Narva, or Rakvere, where they would attack warships, transport vehicles bringing up troops or supplies, wharves or dumps, or shore batteries.

Sometimes they would go out four or five times a day on operations of that sort, and almost every time they ran into Focke-Wulfs.

The German Focke-Wulf-190 fighter had long ceased to be a puzzle to them and now Lunin's men met them without any sense of thrill or curiosity. The Germans were reinforcing their fighter force with new aircraft more than six months after the Soviet air force had been re-equipped. The Focke-Wulf was a formidable aircraft superior in all respects to the Messerschmitt-109. But in the third year of the war Soviet fighters were more than a match for it. And the gap between the fighting qualities of the Focke-Wulf pilots and those of the men flying Soviet aircraft was even wider than the gap between the fighting qualities of the aircraft themselves.

Skirmishes, dog-fights, battles with Focke-Wulfs took place nearly every day and the advantage was always with the Soviet squadron. Its pilots had studied perfectly all the features of the Focke-Wulf, all its strong and its weak points; they knew by heart all the tactical tricks that the German pilots repeated so often. During the three months —July, August and September—Lunin's squadron escorted Stormoviks and bombers countless times; and not once did a Focke-Wulf succeed in breaking through to the Soviet aircraft they were escorting. During those three months the squadron did not lose a single aircraft, a single pilot, although it sent dozens of Focke-Wulfs hurtling into the Gulf of Finland.

On the island the pilots lived deep underground, in a dug-out. Their dug-out consisted of two sections: one of them was Lunin's command post, the other contained bunks where they slept. The ceiling was supported by rough-hewn pine trunks from which clear drops of resin exuded and hardened. There was always a fresh aroma of pine-wood in the dug-out; the pilots' clothes, their hair, their hands smelled of resin. A small bright lamp fed by batteries cast a deathly pale light on their faces.

How familiar Lunin was with all those faces, how dear they were to him! It seemed to him that not a year but a whole age had passed since the day he had seen them for the first time. They had changed much in that year. Lunin recalled how, a year ago, Yermakov had referred to the new pilots as "a pack of kids." Well, they were not kids any longer, not by a long chalk. Even Ryabushkin's round face had lost its childish look. A year of fighting had forced them all into manhood, their characters had become firmer, more austere; an enormous experience of fighting lay on the shoulders of each of them. Lunin had long realized that they were fully his match in the art of flying. He smiled when he recalled how he had taught them to take off and land the previous summer. In some respects they had even outstripped him—maybe simply because they were younger. Their sight was keener, for example, their first reactions were quicker and sometimes they took decisions more promptly. Of course, many of them had not acquired his self-control, his ability to take everything into account and foresee everything. But they handled their aircraft and their guns no worse than he.

Each one of them had learned to master his aircraft and each in his own way. Ostrosablin and Dziga, for example, had developed into excellent seconds. At times they lacked resourcefulness and aplomb and Lunin avoided letting them fly alone, without a leader. But in their role of seconds they were first-class—able, vigilant and steady in defence of their leaders. And the leading pilot knew that

with one of them behind him he was well protected in any situation. Karyakin and Ryabushkin excelled all in marksmanship. Besides, in combat Karyakin possessed another quality which distinguished him—temperament. He fought with such ardour and pounced on an enemy aircraft with such persistence, speed and fury that the German airman lost track of him and grew fatally confused. Karyakin nearly always flew together with Ryabushkin. They had a perfect understanding of each other in combat and seemed to merge into one. Khametov and Kostin, on the other hand, fought calmly and smoothly. Their every move was well thought out if somewhat deliberate. They did not waste a movement or make a useless turn, at every stage of battle they envisaged their tasks clearly and strove to fulfil them methodically. Khametov was as gentle and stylish in the air as he was on the ground; he flew stylishly, he fought stylishly. And Kostin was as much the reasoner in the air as he was each evening in the dug-out.

They called Kostin the "theoretician," the "academician," nicknames that contained as much gentle mockery as respect. After every battle he would conduct a careful post-mortem in the dug-out. He would work out each move in the battle in the way a chess-player works out each move in a game; he would find the reasons for success and dwell in the most minute detail on every blunder or error. He wanted to work out fighting-formulas which could be expressed in algebraic symbols. He dreamed of placing air battles in categories and types and tried to devise rules of behaviour for every category, every type. He was always having to violate his pre-established rules himself and to start all over again, because reality always turned out to be more complicated and varied than any logical structure. But there were occasions when the fighting developed almost as Kostin had foreseen; these occasions filled Kostin with unparalleled joy, and all his comrades would rejoice with him out of friendly affection.

During the year of living and fighting together there had

grown up between the pilots the same serene, strong, unclouded friendship which as Lunin remembered existed among the old pilots of Rassokhin's squadron. There was no room in their company for those trivial squabbles that have their origin in irritation, over-fatigue or envy, for those casual resentments which arise so often in all community dwellings. The constant companionship of death and the knowledge of the importance of their cause purged their hearts of the trivial and base. Like Rassokhin, Kabankov, Serov and Chepelkin, they had long been linked by a chain of agonizing alarms for each other's safety and had on many occasions shown their readiness to risk their lives for each other. They would have perished if between them there had not been that devotion and friendship, a natural, strong friendship, disinterested, simple, loyal.

Tatarenko was everybody's favourite. It was not only a matter of affection—he swept them all off their feet. All the time. He was irresistible. Lunin himself was just as enthusiastic about the man as anybody else.

Tatarenko had grown into an astonishing fighter-pilot, the like of which Lunin had never known. Both in the art of pilotage and in his skill in air fighting he far surpassed all the others. Lunin was not sure whether "skill" was even the right word for it. It seemed to be less a matter of acquiring skill than of possessing a special talent. In the way that people possess a talent for playing the violin, or for painting, or composing verse, Tatarenko had a talent for air fighting.

He had more enemy aircraft to his credit than any other pilot in the regiment. However, the most noteworthy thing was not the number of aircraft he had shot down but the way he did it. He went into battle with no set of rules as Kostin did. He was inexhaustibly inventive in battle; not one of his combats was like another. Fighting was an art with him and, like a true artist, he never repeated himself.

He handled his aircraft superbly. It was like an extension of his own being, as obedient as his own limbs. No

one else could get such a turn of speed, such manoeuvrability out of his aircraft as he. And yet he did the most ingenious tricks without a trace of strain or haste, without jerks and jumps, without effort. But it was by no means this superlative handling of his aircraft that Lunin considered to be Tatarenko's main quality. From his own experience he knew that to be a good fighter one needed to be much more than a clever pilot. In Lunin's opinion the strongest feature of Tatarenko's talent was the fact that he understood and fought air combat not as a contest between machines but between men.

Tatarenko relied not so much on the superiority of his aircraft over that of his opponent as on his own superiority over the man. He fought not an enemy aircraft but the man, the enemy who flew it. He possessed a remarkable gift: by the way an aircraft was flying he could judge the quality of the pilot at the controls. He could instantly detect the braggart who secretly lacked confidence in himself; the man who was timid, but who out of fear of his superior officer was capable of doing something that looked brave; and the man who, though really brave, was tired and sceptical and couldn't care less. And Tatarenko got the better of them all because as a man he was their better—braver, more devoted, more inventive, more skilful—and because he believed in the justice of his cause, and they did not.

His teeth and the whites of his eyes had lost none of their power to dazzle, his black locks were as curly as ever. He was no less polite and affable with everybody. Yet he had changed in the same way as the rest—even more so.

He was much thinner, and this made all his features sharper and sterner. He had become more pensive, more taciturn and sometimes sought solitude. There were times when he could spend a whole evening lying on his bed without uttering a word. He was fretting about something, it seemed, and had been for some time.

He acquired the habit of going for lonely walks on the island, sometimes to bathe. The island was small and one could not walk far on it, and Tatarenko had little spare time—he was either fighting in the air or on station duty near his aircraft, ready to take off at any moment, or he was asleep. Whenever he did find a free hour, however, he went for a walk.

He walked along the shore, on a sandy beach between the waves and the pine-woods. The sea was shallow round the island and each wave would break with a protracted rumble and then slide back a long, long way, revealing a broad strip of smooth wet sand. Tatarenko took long strides, swinging his arms. The wind buffeted his face with stinging sand and ruffled his hair. He would walk to the eastern tip, a flat bare spit jutting far into the sea. And there he would stop and stand motionless, gazing to the east, towards Kronstadt, towards Leningrad. Then, with a frown, he would swing round and walk back.

He walked westwards along the other shore. The nearer he approached the western tip the rockier the beach became. He sprang lightly and quickly over the big grey rocks which the waves had worn to smoothness. The rocks became bigger and the crevices he had to jump over deeper. The western end of the island was a long reef of huge rocks. In the evening against the sunset these hunched rocks looked like a herd of enormous black bulls hurtling to the west. The reef stretched under the water and since the waves as a rule came at the island from the west, from the direction of the open sea, there were usually breakers foaming and roaring about the rocks jutting above the water.

Just there, among the breakers, Tatarenko would bathe.

His favourite time was the evening. He did not often have long enough to walk right round the island but he managed to get away practically every evening for a bathe—the station was much nearer the western than the eastern end of the island. He was quite indifferent to the

weather: neither rain nor storm bothered him. He would strip on the last and highest rock, place a stone on his clothes to keep them from being blown away in the wind and dive in.

He would swim to a granite boulder whose top was half concealed in the surf. That was where the sea was roughest. Grasping the top of the boulder with his hands he would fight a duel with the waves which swept over his head, bore down on him with all their weight and then, as they ebbed, tried to tear him from the boulder and suck him after them. This dangerous game with the powerful treacherous swell gave him pleasure just because it demanded all his strength. As autumn approached the storms became more frequent and the struggle with the breakers more difficult. The water grew colder; in September it stung the skin like flames. But Tatarenko went on bathing every evening off to the western tip of the island.

After bathing he would take his supper in the dug-out near the airfield, which was used as the air-crew mess. It was cramped down there—two benches and a table with an oilcloth on the top, under a low timbered vault. By the time Tatarenko got there his comrades had usually finished their meal and left. Only Hilda would be there.

Hilda had accompanied Two Squadron to their island station, too. The only woman at the station, she not only fed her pilots now, she darned their socks, ironed their trousers and laundered their clothes. She had grown used to Tatarenko being late for supper and always waited for him. She took enormous trouble to keep his supper warm and tasty for him. As he ate she stood watching him, occasionally moving to hand him the cruet, a spoon, a fork.

But he noticed neither Hilda nor his supper. There were times when he would swallow the food without speaking a word to her. He was deep in his thoughts, and Hilda knew where those thoughts were.

Like everybody else in the squadron Hilda knew that Tatarenko was in love with Sonya, Slava's sister.

The pilots made many guesses about what Hilda thought and felt about this but they knew nothing for certain—for Hilda never spoke to anyone about her feelings.

3

Early in the spring, long before the squadron was transferred to the island, Uvarov had said to Lunin one day:

"Oh, I nearly forgot. There's something I want your advice about."

"What is it?"

"Well, it's rather an unpleasant business." Uvarov frowned and dropped his voice. "I've at last managed to find out the address of the woman Serov was going to marry."

"No, really?"

"I've had absolutely reliable information."

"Where is she?"

"In the Urals. With her school."

"Impossible! Serov wrote to her care of the school and she never replied."

"That's what makes it worse."

"What, d'you think she got his letter and didn't want to reply?"

"Who knows? Looks like it."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," said Lunin excitedly. "I saw the official reply from the head mistress with my own eyes saying she wasn't with the school."

"I know," said Uvarov. "But that same head mistress replied no less officially to the people I made my enquiries through that she works at the school."

Lunin said nothing and turned away. Uvarov watched him attentively.

"So, you see, I want your advice," Uvarov said. "Shall I let Serov know her address or not?"

"H'm. Just imagine how it will hurt him to find out she got his letter and didn't want to reply to it."

"So I shouldn't let him know?"

"No, you shouldn't."

"And what about her?"

Lunin reflected.

"Write to her and make it as brief and cold as you can. Pilot Nikolai Serov is in Barnaul, at such-and-such a hospital for treatment. Nothing more. Let her do what her conscience tells her."

"I've just written to her on those lines," said Uvarov.

So Serov, too, was a lonely one, Lunin thought bitterly. There were people in the world who were fated to be lonely.

Slava was finding life entirely to his satisfaction.

What, it might be asked, could a healthy thirteen-year-old lad find to interest him in monotonous garrison life on a small cramped island? There was not even room to run about in properly. He knew every tree-stump, every rock on the island within twenty-four hours of landing there. Yet far from being bored Slava had never found life so interesting. And all because there were aircraft on the island.

Slava had been interested in aircraft from his earliest years; he had always loved them. But before, aircraft had attracted his attention only because they moved, flew and fought; he had not been able to imagine what made them move and fly. However, during his station life aircraft had gradually disclosed their secrets to him. And now these secrets were for him the most enchanting things in the world.

His studies with Deyev contributed no little to his enthusiasm. True, Deyev taught him not about aircraft but about the subjects which are studied at secondary school. But Deyev was always pottering about with aircraft engines, testing them or repairing them, and by stages Slava learned something about them. And when

Slava learned something about them he wanted to learn all.

He hung about the aircraft and paid careful attention to the work of the mechanics. He asked countless questions and received willing answers, for the mechanics themselves were in love with their aircraft and enjoyed talking about them. Soon Slava knew not only the use of every engine part, he trained his ear to tell the condition an engine was in and what was going on inside it. He was in the seventh heaven when he could potter about with an engine, and the mechanics gladly let him help them with their work because he was clever and willing.

He had shot up during the last year and was a tall boy for his age. For some time he had been listed as a fitter (that was more proper) and he wore the clothes of a fitter —shabby oil-stained dungarees. He tried to stride along like a grown-up, to speak in a bass voice, but now and again his voice would break and sometimes he would burst into his skipping run. As Lunin had no separate quarters on the island Slava lived in a dug-out with the mechanics and fitters; he knew all their favourite slang and struck up as close a friendship with them as with the pilots. He shared their selfless, difficult, clever work and was proud of the fact that they spoke to him as to an equal when they were working.

However, his best friend was still Ilya Tatarenko.

They had been friends for a long time. But recently their friendship had acquired a new, different character. The point was that Tatarenko could now never for one moment forget that Slava was Sonya's brother.

The sight of Slava at once reminded Tatarenko of Sonya and of his tender feelings for her, his anxiety about her safety, and the pangs of separation. And Slava guessed it.

In itself, Tatarenko's love for Sonya interested Slava very little because Slava had no inclination to think about love. With a child's naïveté he saw Tatarenko's love for

Sonya only as a way of teasing his sister. Besides, he shared the point of view, widespread in the squadron, that Tatarenko would do much better to fall in love with Hilda. At the same time Slava felt unconsciously that he now had some sort of power over his friend. And he was right.

When the squadron flew to the island, Sonya did not go to say good-bye to Tatarenko; besides, she did not answer the brief, shyly-phrased note he wrote to her soon after arriving on the island. Now Slava was the only link left between him and Sonya. Sonya wrote to her brother from time to time and Slava gladly showed her letters to Tatarenko. His name was never mentioned, yet he knew those letters by heart and waited for them with far greater impatience than Slava.

Lunin, of course, guessed that Sonya and Tatarenko had fallen out but he could not imagine what about. All he could see was that Tatarenko was suffering, and he felt sorry for him. He was also surprised. Was it true, then, that one could not love without suffering? He used to think he was the only one like that but it appeared that Serov was in the same boat, and Hilda too, maybe, and even Tatarenko.

Recently, however, he had been telling himself firmly that he was completely satisfied with his fate. What else did he need? Wasn't the love of his comrades enough for him?

Lunin was held in affection by his superiors and his subordinates alike. He knew it, though their affection for him had grown gradually and imperceptibly; he considered himself unworthy of it and was greatly embarrassed by any demonstration of it. And during recent months those demonstrations had appeared at every step. He had only to mention that he liked semolina pudding with stewed fruit for that very dish to appear before him at supper. He had only to complain that the moths had been at the

lining of his winter cap during the summer for a new, most excellent cap to arrive by next launch from Kronstadt. In fact, he now took care not to praise anything that belonged to someone else—whether it was a cigarette-lighter, a sweater, a fountain pen, a captured revolver, a book, a tin of boot-polish, a map case, a tube of tooth-paste or a collar stud—because if he did so the owner would immediately make him a present of it. He often noticed that his instructions were fulfilled with a certain special willingness—they were not just instructions but Lunin's instructions. He knew the pilots were jealous of each other about him, and he tried to pay equal attention to each of them so as not to overlook somebody and cause offence. Even the most experienced of them, men who flew and fought quite as well as he did himself, considered it an honour to be taken up by him as his second. And when fighting he felt the care they all took of him, their readiness to dash to his aid should the least danger arise.

He encountered the same friendly feelings towards his person in the regiment, from Shakhbazyan and Yermakov, even from Proskuryakov who was now a lieutenant-colonel. Lunin was their old, tried comrade-in-arms with whom they had fought together in the difficult days, and when Proskuryakov spoke to Lunin over the telephone his stern booming bass which usually struck terror into the telephone operators became mild and gentle.

The whole division was fond of Lunin and proud of him. Though outwardly his relations with Uvarov seemed to be dry and official, the two men were the closest friends. Uvarov often extolled Lunin's squadron as a model for other units. And when some specially important and difficult task fell to the division Lunin was the one who generally received the assignment.

One evening when flying was over for the day Lunin was informed during supper that Uvarov and Proskuryakov had flown in and were at the command post. He rose and hurried out.

It was late autumn and there was a slight drizzle; in the pitch darkness Lunin strayed several times off the path, though he knew it by heart. It was dark and gloomy in the dug-out, too. The light of the single lamp lit no more than the table where Uvarov and Proskuryakov sat; the rest of the place was plunged in semi-darkness.

"We mustn't take any risks," Lunin heard Uvarov say. "We need an experienced man for this—a careful, able pilot. I'd send Lunin himself."

Realizing that Uvarov had not noticed him come in Lunin coughed and walked up to the table.

Uvarov beckoned him to a chair, placed a map in front of him and at once began briefing him.

He had to take off in about an hour and fly southwards across the straits separating the island from the mainland to a point Uvarov indicated on the map. And he had to carry out the operation without the Germans noticing anything. In that square on the map, on the German side of the front, was a small lake that narrowed in the middle, in the shape of the figure eight. At 23.20 hours precisely a heavy transport aircraft would circle over that lake. Lunin had to meet it there in the dark, recross the front and escort the transport into Leningrad.

"You are responsible for its safe arrival," said Uvarov.

"I understand," replied Lunin.

"Who will you take as your second?"

"Tatarenko."

"Good. Get going."

The drizzle had ceased when Lunin and Tatarenko walked to their aircraft, but the darkness had grown still more intense. Whenever Lunin stopped, Tatarenko, treading on his heels, bumped into him. The only thing to be seen was the occasional faint glitter of a puddle. They flew off into pitch darkness.

They climbed very high in order to cross the straits and the coastline without the sound of their engines betraying them to the Germans. There was not a single land-

mark and they had to fly by their instruments. If there were the slightest error in the instruments' reckoning they would never find that lake, for it was no more than a mile long. Anyway, it seemed doubtful whether they would see it in such darkness.

Below something flashed barely perceptible. Lunin knew from his map that there should be a river below him. He picked it out by the gleam of the water. He led Tatarenko along the river up to a point where it looped and came nearest to the lake.

Turning away from the river they again flew in complete darkness. Lunin glanced at his watch: he knew to the second when they ought to be over the lake. That is, if they were on the right course. Now it would be soon. Yes, there was the faintest gleam of water below them. What a relief!

The lake really was shaped like a figure eight—waisted in the middle, broadening at each end. 23.18 hours. On such a night the transport aircraft could be seen only against a background of water. That meant the fighters would have to be higher than the plane they were to meet. They climbed and made one circle, then another.

"There it is," said Tatarenko.

Lunin saw it at the same moment. A large black shadow slid across the grey water. It was a heavy transport aircraft. They had effected the meeting.

All three aircraft flew together towards Leningrad. When they were approaching the front an immense searchlight beam stabbed the darkness. The hum of the transport aircraft's engines must have been detected. The searchlight probed the sky nervously, snatching wisps of cloud out of the darkness. On, on, if only they could get through in time!

The blue beam suddenly touched Tatarenko's aircraft which was flying last. Behind it, to port and starboard, little stars twinkled and died—bursts of flak. But the German ack-ack was too late—there was the front. Tata-

renko slipped out of the beam. The guns blazed away into empty space far behind him. Only two minutes to the airfield. The same airfield where the squadron had been based during the first autumn of the war. A familiar spot. There was the landing T outlined with lamps. A flare rose and cast a brilliant light over the airfield. The transport aircraft landed first.

As Lunin landed and climbed down from the cockpit a car drew up. The door opened and from inside the car came Uvarov's voice.

"Get in, Konstantin Ignatyevich. Let's go and see who they've brought from over there."

Uvarov and Proskuryakov, it turned out, had both come to the airfield.

Lunin sat beside Uvarov in the car which drove them fast across the field.

The big, clumsy-looking fuselage of the transport aircraft was lit up by the dim blue-painted head-lamps of several ambulances with red crosses on their sides. Among the airfield personnel who had gathered round the aircraft could be seen white-gowned medical nurses and orderlies. The door of the aircraft was open and a number of bodies covered in rags were being carefully carried down the steps.

"Wounded?" asked Lunin.

"From a partisan detachment," Uvarov told him.

They got out of the car and walked to the aircraft. People made way for them. Sick and wounded passengers were still being brought to the ground. They were laid on stretchers and at once carried to the ambulances. All this took place in complete silence—no one complained, no one asked a question, no one cried or groaned.

The people were covered with all sorts of rags and in the semi-darkness it was not easy to distinguish between men and women. They seemed to be mainly women. Some of them, feeling themselves on the ground, tried to get up and walk. Most of them, however, could only lie.

Lunin was specially struck by the face of a man who suddenly appeared out of the aircraft at the top of the steps. A bright ray of light caught his face. Possibly it was the light shining in his eyes that gave his face a special significance. It was very haggard, but stern and resolute, with a soft beard which looked almost black in the light of the head-lamps. The man wore a tattered greatcoat and in his arms he held a small child bundled in a blanket. The child kept its thin little face with frightened eyes pressed close to the man's cheek. It was a girl of about three, no older.

Hands stretched out to the man from the darkness, hands that wanted to take the child from him, but the little girl only clung to him the tighter, and he said: "There's no need."

Slowly, step by step, he came down to the ground. He walked with difficulty, he seemed to be limping. Someone offered him an arm.

"I'll manage," he said.

"That's the detachment commander and his daughter," someone standing behind Lunin said in the darkness.

"Is the mother here, too?"

"So I've heard."

The little girl suddenly screwed up her face.

"Mummy."

"Here's Mummy," said her father, pressing her tightly to him and walking carefully on.

He carried the girl to a stretcher that two orderlies were lifting from the ground. The figure of a woman was lying motionless on it under a cloth.

The man bent over the woman's face.

"Lisa!"

The woman's face stirred slightly.

"Lisa. It's me. We've arrived, Lisa. It's all over. Look at me, Lisa. Lisa!"

The woman's face moved. She opened her eyes.

Lunin recognized her at once, recognized her without

a shadow of doubt. He recognized her despite the dim light and her husband's back which screened her from him.

"Hurry up. Take her to the ambulance."

The stretcher on which Lisa lay was carried to an ambulance; her husband, clutching the little girl to his breast, limped along beside the stretcher-bearers. The ambulance sounded its horn and its engine throbbed. The stretcher was placed inside, hands reached out for the little girl, the man was helped in, too.

Someone shut the doors, the ambulance moved off. The faint light of its head-lamps faded away in the distance.

Lunin stood motionless staring into the darkness.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

To the West

1

Since autumn 1942, Maria Sergeyevna had been living in a small town in the Molotov Region and teaching at the school which had been evacuated from Leningrad.

This small town which quite recently had been little more than a village with a factory that dated back to the 18th century, had grown remarkably during the war;

people, factories and office organizations had poured into it. It had acquired two garment factories from Byelorussia, a large metal works transferred from the Ukraine with all its machinery and personnel, a textile factory, several evacuated schools and two scientific research institutes. And all these factories, schools and institutes worked to full capacity—turning out munitions, and uniforms, teaching children, and conducting scientific experiments. And the people who had come with their factories and other organizations crowded into low-roofed houses built of logs blackened with age, lying between the dark fir-clad hills and the cold, grim and magnificently beautiful river.

The Leningrad school occupied a long old two-storey wooden house with a tin roof. Maria Sergeyevna taught Russian and was in charge of all the teaching; in other words, she was second after the head mistress. The head mistress was new to the post, having been appointed shortly before Maria Sergeyevna's arrival; she replaced the one with whom Maria Sergeyevna had worked in Leningrad and who had answered the enquiries about her. The school children had to be not only taught but fed and clothed and dosed as well; their linen had to be washed, there were letters to be written to their parents; the building had to be heated, the rooms kept clean, the floors brushed and scrubbed, the roof mended, the chimneys swept; squabbles had to be patched up and good relations maintained with the head mistress who though active and energetic was dry by nature, lacking in sensibility, and fussy to the point of silliness sometimes. Maria Sergeyevna got up at five and did not get to bed till after midnight. She only saw her children Irina and Sergei with the other children now—they lived and studied with the rest of the school. She had recovered from the effects of the famine and had even put on weight but some of the changes that had been wrought in her were beyond repair: her complexion had grown a little darker, more sallow, there were wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and she suffered from frequent

racking headaches which, because of the amount of work, she had to get over as best she could without resting. When she left Leningrad she had been so exhausted that she had brought no clothes with her and now neither she nor the children had anything fit to wear. All year round she went about in her one woollen frock and a floppy old coat; in cold weather she wrapped a faded shawl over her head. She wore tall felt boots in winter, which made her look even smaller.

Her constant preoccupation with the children kept her mind free from idle thoughts of the past but the memory of the pilot Kolya Serov remained with her like an ache to which she had long grown accustomed.

She was completely taken aback when one early spring day in 1943, a short, cryptic note arrived, in which some unknown colonel called Uvarov informed her tersely and, evidently, quite dispassionately, that Lieutenant Nikolai Serov was lying in a certain hospital in Barnaul. He was alive! But what was the matter with him? Was he maimed? Maybe he had lost an arm or an eye? Perhaps he was a cripple, helpless, needing her care. . . . She turned the sheet of paper over and over trying to learn something more from it but the note was hopelessly short and had nothing more to tell her.

Her first impulse was to drop everything, her work, her children, and leave for Barnaul. She soon realized that that was out of the question. Who would let her go? Of course, she could leave without asking anybody, by simply going to the station and getting into any train going east. The town lay on one of the main trans-Siberian lines. But she knew the school was understaffed, there was no one to replace her and her departure would be equivalent to flight, treachery, desertion. She decided not to leave for the present but to write.

She wrote to Serov long after midnight. She wrote while the six other teachers who shared the room with her breathed heavily in sleep and the timbers of the house cracked

in the grip of the persistent Ural frosts; the big iron stove palpitated with heat but in the corners of the room the hoarfrost glistened. She wrote on ruled pages torn out of an exercise book, wrote more openly and candidly than ever her words had been. She complained about their separation, she poured out her worries about him, she asked him questions and offered him tender consolation, she rejoiced that he was alive and promised to devote all her life to looking after him. By the time she had finished this long letter, so full of tenderness, kindness and devotion, of hopes for happiness and readiness to undertake anything, the teachers were stirring in their beds and beginning to get up. She posted it early that morning.

Serov, however, was not to read that letter.

Over a month later it was returned to the sender. Among numerous postmarks on the envelope was written in big uneven letters: "Addressee left 13.3.43."

And that was so. Serov was no longer in Barnaul when that letter arrived. He was considerably nearer Maria Sergeyevna—in Sverdlovsk, lying in a huge and famous hospital where an eminent surgeon was treating him according to the latest methods for a fistula on the leg.

When Serov was wounded over a year ago it was obvious that the most serious injury he had suffered was to his arm. It was fractured in many places, and several times the decision was taken to amputate—in the regiment, during the journey in the hospital train and in Barnaul. But after long hesitation the Barnaul doctors dropped the idea and even then they were quite surprised to see the arm mend. Months passed and Serov began to move his arm at the shoulder, then he found he could bend his elbow, and then that he could move his fingers uncertainly. And the doctors were proud that they had not amputated, and when Serov wrote his first letter—to Lunin—with the hand of his wounded arm, there was rejoicing among the entire medical staff of the hospital.

Serov had other wounds besides that smashed arm; his

face was burned and a bullet had gone through his leg. The burns which, at first, were horrible to look at and very painful to bear, healed fairly soon. His eyes were intact, the brows and eyelashes grew again and all that remained were scars in the form of several shapeless lightish patches on the skin. But the leg caused some trouble.

The leg wound healed sluggishly and would not close properly. It suppurated and nothing could make it stop suppurating. Finally a fistula formed on the place of the wound.

X-ray examination showed that the fistula went deep, to the bone. It did not respond to any treatment. The months passed and Serov's arm recovered, though slowly; but his leg did not heal. He was neither fit nor ill: his leg ached when he put his weight on it, but not badly, and sometimes he felt he would be able to walk if he had his boots on. However, the doctor strictly forbade him to walk on his injured leg and with the help of crutches he had to hop on one leg about the ward, along the passage, down the stairs and into the hospital grounds.

There were few things he did not think about during those long, long months of his incarceration in the Barnaul hospital. He thought about the war, about the future of his country, about his regiment. And about Maria Sergeyevna.

Of her he thought involuntarily; he tried not to think of her. He was surprised at himself for not having forgotten her. He blamed her for nothing, considering she had behaved quite naturally. He loved her but she had hesitated; he could see how hesitant she had been. Quite right, too: what sort of match was he for her? He was so unread, so unpolished.

Events of vast importance took place in the world while he lay in a hospital ward in a remote Siberian town. In the ward he listened to every evening radio announcement about the retreat of the Red Army in the south during the summer of 1942; it was there that he learned of the fall of Sevastopol, of the loss of Rostov for the second time,

of the German offensive against the Northern Caucasus, of the news that the Germans had reached the Volga. There, too, he experienced the joy of the victory of Stalingrad and of the raising of the siege of Leningrad. All these events happened without him. At a time when millions were fighting for justice, for the happiness of their native land, for the future of humanity, he lay useless and unneeded, tied to his bed.

Everything printed in the papers or broadcast that had to do with air force he followed with special attention. The life of pilots on active service was what he understood and cared for most. Besides, he always hoped to pick up the trail of his own regiment.

But that was pretty hopeless. Evidently there were too many air regiments on the vast front stretching from the Arctic Ocean to the Black Sea. What was more, war correspondents, for obvious reasons, did not identify the units of the airmen they mentioned in their dispatches. Not more than two or three times did Serov run across a mention in the Moscow newspapers of the feats of "pilots in the air unit commanded by Comrade Proskuryakov." One of these communiqués referred to Lunin by name. But the other pilots had names Serov did not recognize.

Serov cut these brief items out of the newspapers and slipped them into his wallet next to the short letter he had received from Lunin. A few letters, a few newspaper cuttings—that was all that linked him to his regiment now.

He was afraid that on recovery he would be posted to some other unit. In the early days, when recovery seemed far off, this possibility had not worried him much. He knew that, as a rule, men discharged from hospital were not sent back to their original units but he hoped that when his turn came he would be able to arrange something or find someone to ask about it.

The fistula did not heal; the doctor tending him was no less concerned about it than the patient himself. This young doctor had taken his medical degree at Sverdlovsk where

he had been a pupil of an eminent professor—a specialist in bone diseases. He wrote to the professor who replied positively and as a result Serov left for Sverdlovsk in mid-March.

As Serov hobbled along the swaying corridor of the train he sought consolation in telling himself that Sverdlovsk was, at any rate, nearer the front than Barnaul. But, of course, that was cold comfort. At the hospital in Sverdlovsk he was put back to bed, his wound was examined, and the professor issued instructions that he was to be prepared for an operation.

The operation took place in April. The fistula was lanced, the bone gouged. The professor proposed an altogether different treatment, using the latest methods. That meant yet more months in bed.

During July and August when the great battle of the Kursk Salient was being fought and all Ukraine east of the Dnieper was being liberated Serov was again able to limp about the ward. The professor's new methods were effective: the leg healed properly and the fistula disappeared, leaving a scar. And then Serov began to worry whether he would be able to get back to his regiment.

The officer from the local military commissariat who used to visit the hospital patients explained to Serov, reasonably enough, that it made no difference in what regiment a man served his country. However, for Serov there was a difference—only in his old regiment would he be trusted with an aircraft. He was fit again, of course, but, all the same, after so many months in hospital his condition would not satisfy the standards usually required of a fighter-pilot. What would they give him to do? A pen-pushing job? Running the stores? He would get back to an aircraft only where people remembered the sort of pilot he had been. So he wrote to Uvarov. Uvarov promised to do something and wrote at once both to the local military commissariat and to some big shot in Moscow.

Late in October Serov's affairs were finally put in order.

He was told that on his discharge from hospital he was to proceed to Moscow and present himself at an office where the man in charge had been forewarned of his arrival by Uvarov.

His discharge came in December. He turned in the hospital gown and received his papers, shoulder-straps, a slightly worn army uniform—the local stores had no naval uniforms—and travelling rations for several days. He said good-bye to the doctors and the nurses and to his envious wardmates and, limping slightly, walked to the railway station.

December that year was wet, with many days of sleet and low sullen clouds. The station and the square outside were packed with people, waiting in their thousands for trains going either east or west. There were women and children and a great many soldiers. Trains were few and far between and some people had been waiting for days. With a considerable amount of difficulty Serov reached the R.T.O. who told him in a hoarse voice that he would have to wait.

"When can you send me?" Serov asked.

"Not today in any case," he was told. "Why, this colonel here has been waiting since Tuesday."

For two days and two nights Serov sat on his kit-bag in a corner of the station waiting-room, listening to the excited hubbub of the crowd and to the patter of the rain on the windows, and not knowing what to do. There in the corner he struck up acquaintance with an infantry lieutenant, a very tall, young man, who was being sent to his unit somewhere beyond Moscow. The lieutenant was eager to get back to active service and found the delay unbearable. He convinced Serov that there was no point in waiting for the direct train to Moscow: the main thing was to get out of Sverdlovsk—after that they would push on somehow.

"The thing is to leave. Otherwise we'll never get there," he kept saying.

There were always troop trains passing westwards through Sverdlovsk. Why shouldn't they look for one of those trains and ask for a lift? That meant climbing down on to the permanent way and taking a look at all the troop trains. Serov was not quite sure that this was the right way to leave but he could not wait any longer and meekly followed the lieutenant.

They walked for a long time in the rain among the railway carriages, tripping over the rails in the darkness. They found a troop train with a locomotive attached; it had steam up, too. A score of vans for the troops and one passenger carriage. It was taking an independent sappers battalion somewhere. The lieutenant boldly opened the door of the passenger carriage and they climbed in.

They were met by a grey-haired major. The lieutenant explained who they were and where they wanted to go and asked for a lift.

"I'd be only too glad," said the major, "but we're not going even as far as Molotov. We're of no use to you."

But the lieutenant kept repeating that the main thing was to leave Sverdlovsk. He was an old hand at travelling by rail in war-time. Molotov was nearer Moscow than Sverdlovsk. At that place near Molotov something else might turn up and they would be able to push on farther. The major raised no objections and Serov and his travelling companion remained in the carriage.

The train moved slowly, with long halts at stations. The officers of the sappers battalion read, played cards, wrote letters. For them the trip was a rest. They were all bridge-builders and the task of the battalion was to repair railway bridges on the lines connecting the Urals factories with the front. Serov lay all night long sleepless in his bunk listening to the rumble of the wheels and the splashing of the rain. The thought that he was no longer in hospital, that he was on his way to the front and would soon be back in his regiment, gave him no rest. He fell off to sleep

only towards morning when it was already growing light; he slept all day.

He awoke to find the lieutenant shaking him.

"Get up, this is where we get out," he said. "The train doesn't go any farther."

It was after five and growing dark. The rain was still coming down. The sappers detrained.

"Where are we?" asked Serov.

"Damned if I know," said the lieutenant. "Some little place—I've forgotten the name. Molotov Region. Let's look for the R.T.O."

He walked rapidly along the permanent way. Serov, limping after him, could hardly keep up. Then he read the name of the town on the station wall.

He stopped dead.

It was the town to which Maria Sergeyevna's school had been evacuated.

This was the place he had written to from the regiment. It was from here that the head mistress of the school had written to say that Maria Sergeyevna was not there.

Was the school still here? In all probability, yes. And that head mistress? Probably.

The R.T.O. told them firmly that they had acted foolishly. Had they waited at Sverdlovsk they would eventually have been put on a direct train for Moscow. And they wouldn't have had to wait long, either. They could not count on that here, though. The Moscow train always came in packed, it stopped only four minutes, and nobody ever got off. No troop trains were expected in the near future, either. He advised them to fix themselves up for the night and promised to put them on a train for Kirov in the morning.

An old charwoman offered to put them up for the night in her cottage next to the station; she even promised to light the samovar. The lieutenant picked up his suitcase at once and walked after her; but Serov preferred to wait at the station. He did not fancy the prospect of an endless

conversation with the lieutenant round the samovar in a stuffy room. He wanted to be alone.

He sat on a bench in the waiting-room and thought. Uppermost in his mind was the thought that the school where Maria Sergeyevna used to teach was somewhere near by behind that curtain of rain. And though he had been assured that she was not there, a desire to go and look at the place rose in him. He knew it was nonsense, yet he felt he had to get up and go. Why not, after all? He'd slept all day and, anyhow, didn't feel like sleep now.

He made some enquiries of a red-capped railway worker, and found she knew the Leningrad school well. But it was not near. The town was three miles from the station and the school lay on the far side of the town, near the river.

Serov shouldered his kit-bag and left the station. It was now quite dark. Before him the rare street lamps stretched in a long line, their lights reflected in the puddles. He walked along the pavement from lamp-post to lamp-post along an empty street lined with low-roofed wooden houses. The rain lashed his face. After an hour's walking his greatcoat was so soaked that it had become quite stiff. His heavy service cap stuck to his head. Catching sight of a large building he realized he had reached the town. He came to a square with a public garden in it. Birch-trees. A monument to Lenin. This, of course, must be the town centre. Now, where was the school?

A militia girl directed him. Down that street and the third to the right. The only two-storey building in the lane.

He walked on. The street lamps were even rarer now and when he turned into the lane he found it was quite dark. Where was that two-storey building? His feet sank in the wet mud. An electric light bulb hanging between two poles swayed in the wind. By its faint light he could see a high wooden porch. In the porch stood a short woman, with a shawl over her head and shoulders.

"Where's the school, please?" Serov asked her.

The woman buried her face in her hands and burst into tears.

Then he recognized her.

"Maria!" he cried and dashed up the steps of the porch.

She flung her arms around him and pressed her face to his wet coat.

Everything that had separated them—doubts, suspicions, uncertainty—all collapsed, vanished, melted away without leaving a trace, the moment she burst into tears and he saw she was crying.

They felt they were closer to each other than anybody else in the world and that meant there was no need for any explanations at all. Indeed, they made no attempt to explain anything. For them the only important thing was that they were together; they wanted only to look at each other and to prolong those few hours which were left to them before they had to separate once more.

Maria Sergeyevna said that her husband had come to see her; the news flashed round the school. No one had known that she was married but then no one had ever asked her about it. Despite her dry nature, despite the fact that she probably had no special liking for Maria Sergeyevna, the head mistress at once volunteered to let them have her room and moved for the night into the teachers' dormitory. For that evening and the next morning Maria Sergeyevna was released from all her duties—not by any special instruction or agreement but simply by the fact that whenever she ought to be doing something others did it for her. She was not even bothered by any special curiosity on the part of others; people were not even too eager to take a look at her husband; they knew how precious to her was every minute they could spend alone.

Maria Sergeyevna was no longer crying. Seated on a shabby leather-upholstered sofa near the head mistress's

desk she held Serov's hand, talking confusedly while he listened, not so much heeding her words as gazing at her face. He could see that she had changed but for him she did not seem to have aged or lost her looks; on the contrary, the traces of waiting, privation and anxiety in her face made it all the dearer to him. She, too, saw that his cheeks were sunken, that he had grown thinner and lost strength; she noticed the scars on his face, the way he limped and she quivered with love and concern for him.

He asked her about Irina and Sergei, wanted to see them, was full of eagerness to go to them, and this touched her. The children were already in bed in the dormitory with the others but in the morning they were brought, half-asleep, to their mother. Irina, tall and thin, almost her mother's height, recognized Serov at once but maintained a reserved attitude towards him, said little and looked at him uneasily with big distrustful eyes. But Sergei, who did not recognize Serov at first and remembered him when prompted, at once treated him like one of his closest friends, scrambling on to his knees and even on his shoulders, asking dozens of questions, and begging for buttons and for stars off Serov's shoulder-straps.

That morning Maria Sergeyevna went to the station to see Serov off. The cold rain was still beating down from low clouds. Arm in arm the two of them walked down the long, damp, badly-paved street, wishing it would never end. Another mile to the station. Then over a wooden bridge across a gully. The station square and then the low drab-yellow station building. They were there.

The tall lieutenant, rested, spruce, his boots polished, his cap at a smart angle, was quite bowled over by the news that Serov had found his wife in this unknown little town. They squeezed into the R.T.O.'s office and waited their turn for movement orders. Then they waited in silence on the platform. The train drew in. Serov stooped

and for the last time pressed his face to her cheek that was wet with tears and rain.

She ran the whole length of the platform as the train gathered speed; he watched her with an unusual sense of happiness through the misty window.

2

Lunin and Tatarenko were kept almost two days in Leningrad. After bringing in the transport aircraft from the partisan stronghold they were instructed to present themselves at Air Headquarters. The general wanted to see them.

Together with Uvarov they spent the night at the airfield in a small room for officers in transit. Uvarov and Tatarenko slept but Lunin's eyes did not close once.

After two restless hours in bed he dressed quietly and went outside. The wind was blowing in gusts, a cold rain cut his face. Winter should have set in long ago but that year the autumn had dragged on and the weather had been rainy all December. Not that Lunin noticed either the wind or the rain. All night, to the surprise of the sentry, he paced up and down the wet track outside the house.

Memories chased each other through his mind. He remembered Lisa's voice so distinctly that she might have been just speaking to him. He remembered the way she laughed, the way she clicked the spoon against her teeth when she ate jam, the way she would raise her hands to the nape of her neck to fix her hair. That was all so long ago. Lost for ever.

For many years he had seen her every day, had been able at any moment to look into her eyes, feel her beside him, sense her breathing. And suddenly she had gone. He had lost her. How had she passed her life without him, that life which had been so close to him once? How had

she met that man who had become her second husband? Where was her daughter born? Where had she been at the outbreak of war and how had she happened to be there, behind the front, in a partisan detachment? Her deeds, her thoughts, her love—all were mysteries to him and would remain so for ever.

He blamed her for nothing now. He even found it strange and surprising that he should have considered her guilty for so long. Guilty of what?

Was she obliged to love him? Why should she? What had he done to deserve it? He had planted her down at a remote air station, he had been fully occupied with his aircraft, seeing her only at night and not taking the slightest interest in her life, calmly assuming for some reason that she was quite content with everything. And at the mere idea that she should love not him but another he had fallen into a furious rage. He had not wanted to hear a thing about it, only to judge her and punish her.... But what for?

And now by pure chance their paths had momentarily crossed. She would never know about it. It would never occur to her that he had escorted that aircraft, that he had seen her lying ill on a stretcher. What was the matter with her? Would she recover? He would never know even that. Her husband had limped beside the stretcher. He must love her; every gesture showed that. Lunin did not feel the slightest enmity towards her husband. And what a little girl they had! Lisa's daughter. Perhaps if he and Lisa had had children things would have been different. And again he recalled her voice, her hands, her laugh, her face bent over a book. Lost for ever.

Lunin and Tatarenko were at liberty until the following evening so next morning they rode into town. Getting out of the tram they strolled for a long while through the wet streets. Lunin said little. Tatarenko told him how, the evening before at the station, he had met the air crews of the Stormoviks they had escorted so often in battle.

They had fought together so many times yet they had never met on the ground before.

"It was they who picked me out," Tatarenko said. "I was standing there having a smoke when suddenly I heard someone behind me say: 'There's one of Lunin's men.' "

Lunin frowned.

"We're Rassokhin's men," he said.

"Rassokhin's and Lunin's—it's the same thing, everybody knows that. I turn round and see a major and two captains. They shake my hand, throw their arms round my shoulder, biff me on the back. 'He's the fellow who rescued us so often,' they say. Of course they didn't mean me personally, they meant the whole squadron. They know every one of our pilots, they can tell them at once in the air. So we got talking and remembering things. . . ."

They reached the bridge that led to Vasilyevsky Island.

"Where are we going?" Tatarenko asked suddenly.

It had only just occurred to him that Lunin was taking him somewhere.

Lunin started and looked around. He too seemed to have forgotten which way they were walking. Then he suddenly recalled.

"To Sonya. We've got to spend the time somewhere, after all."

Tatarenko stopped dead in the middle of the pavement.

"I'm not coming."

"Why not?"

"I tell you, I'm not coming."

"But why not?"

"She doesn't want to see me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, it's obvious."

Lunin looked at Tatarenko hard.

"Keep me company," he said firmly. "I'll go up to her and you can wait for me in the yard."

"I don't want to wait in the yard, Comrade Major."

"Well, on the embankment outside the University."

"Very well."

Sonya was delighted to see Lunin. She led him at once into the kitchen, sat him at the kitchen-table which was covered with textbooks and exercise books, and set about preparing tea.

Lunin marvelled at the way she had grown and improved in looks since he had last seen her.

They talked most of the time, of course, about Slava. Lunin commended Slava for his studies and said that if he remained as keen on aircraft as he was at present he might make a good engineer.

He questioned Sonya about the way she was living and she answered readily. Her time was, as before, divided between work and studying for the exams. And, as before, she had too little time for study; after all, there were less than six months left before the exams. Lunin saw that she was seriously worried about her exams—you could tell it by the change in the expression on her face when she talked about them.

She told him about her work too. And as Lunin sat there, watching her and listening to her voice, he thought how much those young eyes had already seen, how much those girlish, almost childish hands had accomplished in life.

She asked nothing about Tatarenko. And Lunin was careful about the way he mentioned him. He just let it come out that he had flown to Leningrad with Tatarenko. A guarded look came into her eyes and the light died out of them. She changed the subject at once. But from her face Lunin saw for certain that his news had shaken her. Now he knew she would broach the subject herself. It was only a matter of time. And he gave her time.

When she did broach the subject it was by mentioning not Tatarenko but Hilda.

So that was the trouble! Lunin smiled to himself, deep down in his heart.

She said she liked Hilda tremendously. Didn't he think Hilda was marvellously pretty?

Lunin could not deny that.

"We've grown so used to seeing her about that we don't notice how pretty she is any more," he said. "But I must admit she's an uncommonly pretty girl. Like a china doll with those blue eyes and that tender pink complexion. Everything so perfectly formed—nose, lips, ears."

"There's only one thing wrong," said Sonya. "Her face is a bit too lifeless. I can't make up my mind whether she's intelligent."

Lunin felt at a loss. He had never wondered whether Hilda was intelligent.

"She's got an intelligent heart," he said, trying to be fair.

He explained that Hilda was the daughter of a farmhand from a remote Estonian hamlet and that all her education amounted to a couple of years at a village school. It would be absurd to expect her to have any deep knowledge but she had an infallible sense of what was true in life. She had been with the pilots of the squadron since the beginning of the war. In the most difficult times she had done her modest job excellently; she had been a true comrade. The pilots had grown so accustomed to her that they could not imagine the squadron without Hilda. She was a sort of link between the squadron's past and present, and they valued her specially because she had been a friend of those who were no more—Baiseitov, Chepelkin, Kabankov. Rassokhin, the squadron's former commander, had been concerned for Hilda's safety right up to the time of his death—he gave her his own sheepskin.

"Well, he ought to love her and not dare torture her the way he does. It's up to you, as his commanding officer, to tell him."

Sonya's dark brows contracted, her eyes darted fire, her cheeks blazed.

"Who are you talking about?" Lunin asked, making a puzzled face.

"Your Tatarenko!"

Sonya stood up.

He saw he would have to do something about this at once. He laughed and was relieved to hear it sounded natural.

"Tatarenko? What's he got to do with it?" His face expressed complete bewilderment. "What nonsense!" He laughed again. "Why, Tatarenko has nothing at all to do with Hilda. During the eighteen months he's been in the squadron, he's not looked at her once. What's more, Hilda isn't the sort of girl to go on bothering about someone who doesn't pay her any attention. Who's been telling you stories? Young Slava, I wouldn't be surprised. That's a joke. Slava giving his views on love! What are we coming to?"

Lunin laughed and as Sonya listened her face cleared.

"I haven't seen him for a long time," she said.

"Would you like to see him?"

"Where is he?" asked Sonya, blushing.

"Down below. On the embankment, outside the University. Frozen stiff, probably. He didn't want to come up."

"Didn't want to! Why not?"

"He was afraid."

"Afraid!"

"Afraid you wouldn't like to see him."

Sonya jumped up from her stool, then sat down again.

"Go and fetch him," Lunin suggested to her. "I'll wait for you here."

Sonya leaped to her feet again but then stood still, hesitant.

"Go on, go on."

She snatched a shawl and rushed out. The door slammed loudly behind her.

A few minutes later they both came in, smiling sheepishly. The three of them drank tea together. Sonya and Tatarenko did not have a word to say to each other— they spoke only to Lunin—but they kept glancing at each other all the time.

It was still several hours till evening but Lunin suddenly rose and prepared to leave. Tatarenko sprang up, too, but Lunin told him firmly that he was going for a walk by himself. And left alone.

Lunin met Tatarenko and Uvarov that evening at Air Headquarters. They heard an Order of the Day from which they learned important news. Guards Colonel Proskuryakov was appointed division commander, Guards Lieutenant-Colonel Lunin regiment commander, Guards Senior Lieutenant Tatarenko commander of Two Squadron.

Tatarenko's face glowed with pride.

Uvarov noticed this and frowned.

"Do you realize the kind of squadron that's being entrusted to you?" he asked Tatarenko.

"I do."

"You'll take care of its people? You won't squander its fame?"

"I give you my oath on it," said Tatarenko.

Lunin took both Tatarenko's hands in his own and gripped them hard.

3

Serov reached Moscow during that unforgettable period in the city's history when every evening the sky above it was lit up by salutes in honour of the liberation of one city after another.

He arrived early in the morning. As he walked along those undulating streets wet with melting snow and breathed the mild air he felt that joy which every Russian feels who, rarely visiting Moscow, suddenly, by pure chance, in transit, comes to the city, for a few hours or days. Every street, lane, boulevard, every tower, the big

houses and the little houses, they were all as dear and familiar to him as if he had known them from childhood, though he was seeing most of them for the first time. He walked with pleasure right across the city looking for that important military office he had been sent to; he smiled involuntarily at the children playing on the pavements, at women sitting at the gates of courtyards, at militiamen, at the squares and the trams and the trees.

The general in charge of the office was too busy to see him that day. Serov was asked to wait and offered accommodation in an officers' hostel. And it was there that he saw in 1944, for the general was unable to receive him either on the next day or for many days after it. Serov was beginning to form a very poor opinion of that general. But when, at last, the interview took place he changed his mind. The general turned out to be a shrivelled old man with courteous manners and not a trace of pompousness. He was delighted to see Serov.

"I know, I know, you're one of Rassokhin's men," he said.

He knew Serov's story from Uvarov's letter and questioned him closely about his health. Serov was on his guard and insisted that he was quite fit. He tried to move about the office as little as possible, fearing that the general would notice his lameness.

"Well, of course," said the general, "we don't intend to waste men who've fought with Rassokhin and Lunin. You are one of them, and you'll stay so. Report to the regiment and they'll decide there how to use you."

Then, after a moment's thought, he said:

"You'll get there at a most interesting moment, very likely."

"Is there something in the air?" asked Serov boldly.

"You never know, you never know."

The general rose and accompanied him to the office door. He asked Serov to remember him to Uvarov with

whom he had once studied. When they were close to the door he suddenly asked:

"You know Tatarenko, of course."

But Serov had never even heard of him.

"Ah, that means he joined the regiment while you were in hospital," said the general. "I wanted to ask you about him. Well, you'll meet him. A remarkable pilot."

Serov had no idea where his regiment was to be found. From Moscow he was sent to Leningrad. There, at Air Headquarters of the Baltic Fleet he should receive further instructions. It took the train four days to get to Leningrad, through Vologda, Cherepovets, Volkhovstroi and Shlisselburg. And while Serov was looking through the railway carriage window at the ruined stations, at the brick chimneys of gutted houses, at the shell-torn forests around Leningrad the Soviet forces were launching a new large-scale offensive.

The offensive launched near Leningrad against the northern group of the German armies in the slushy days of January, just one year after the siege of the city had been lifted, was the first of the ten crushing blows of 1944 which resulted in the final expulsion of the enemy from Soviet soil.

A very important contribution to the rout of the Germans near Leningrad was made by a small beach-head which the Soviet forces had held since 1941 on the southern shore of the Gulf of Finland, west of Peterhof which was in German hands. This narrow strip of coast, cut off from Leningrad but lying under the reliable protection of the guns of the Kronstadt garrison, did not seem to worry the Germans much for they made no serious attempts to capture it. Yet it was thanks to the fact that the Oranienbaum area was in Soviet hands that not one but two simultaneous concentrated blows could be struck at the Germans—one from Oranienbaum, the other from

the southern outskirts of Leningrad. The two attacking Soviet groups aimed at meeting near the village of Ropsha; doing so they could count on trapping the main German forces located close to Leningrad in the district of Peterhof, Strelna and Ligovo.

The offensive was launched on January the 14th, Serov reached Leningrad the following morning. The air over the city quivered with the rumble of guns. The German artillery at Strelna was bombarding the city systematically and shells whined overhead in the streets. Window glass shattered and fell. But no one in Leningrad had ears for the explosion of German shells; everyone was listening to the mighty roar of the front, to the deafening thunder of their own guns.

Everybody at Air Headquarters was extremely busy. Telephones rang, typewriters clattered, clerks and adjutants with heaps of papers in their hands dashed up and down stairs. Some officers who had served at Headquarters since the outbreak of war recognized Serov, smiled a welcome but had no time to sit and chat with him. Jaundiced from sleepless nights and over-smoking they were not only wrestling with their regular staff work, they were also making hurried preparations to move—Headquarters were being transferred westwards, in the wake of the Army, the Navy and the Air Force.

An adjutant of the chief of staff passed on instructions that Serov was to proceed to the headquarters of his own division which, it turned out, meant going somewhere beyond Oranienbaum, on the coast.

Serov felt excited as he rode in the back of a lorry across the ice of the Marquis Pool, which was not yet very firm and was streaked with dark, steaming channels. How well he knew all these places! St. Isaac's, the enormous derricks at the North Wharf, and straight ahead, that Easter cake of a cathedral in Kronstadt. How many times had he flown over these places in autumn, '41, how many times had he seen the outline of those buildings? There

was the long low headland of Lisy Nos, and there the pale blue strip of the Peterhof coast. How many times had he seen a black flock of Junkers flying from there, and how many times had he flown to meet them?

On his way to the Headquarters Serov met a mechanic he knew who told him that for many months Lunin's squadron had been based on an island west of Kronstadt. Serov remembered the island—it was not far from there that they had fought that battle in the mist returning from which Chepelkin had died.

"But they're not on the island now," said the mechanic. "Everything's on the move now."

Beyond Oranienbaum the thunder of the front became awesome, deafening. The lorry was part of a great stream of vehicles, guns, pontoons, all heading in the same direction—reinforcements and rear equipment trying to keep up with the ever-advancing front. How fit, young and cheerful were the faces of the soldiers! What equipment! And so much of it!

But, of course, what made the deepest impression on Serov were the aircraft.

The farther he rode the more of them he saw above him from the back of the lorry. Squadrons of Stormoviks swept low over the woods, their engines droning loudly. Dozens of bombers, suddenly filling the whole sky, flew over in strict formation as if on parade.

Very high in the brightening sky swift flights of fighters gleamed as they swept round, like schools of fish in a clear creek. From dawn till dusk the air vibrated with the throb of engines. How many Soviet aircraft there were now—and all of them new models! Serov did not see one of the type he had flown in '41.

Division headquarters was located in one of the few buildings left intact by the Germans at an airfield they had recently abandoned. Its windows looked on to the airfield which was littered with skeletons of burned-out Junkers. A part of headquarters equipment was still in

lorries; orderlies were carrying tables, typewriters, drawers full of papers; signallers were unwinding cable and establishing liaison with the regiments. As the sentry on the door examined his papers Serov wondered whether Proskuryakov would be the one to receive him.

But Division Commander Proskuryakov was somewhere with his units. Serov was received by the deputy chief of staff, a lieutenant-colonel, a newcomer whose name Serov did not recognize. The lieutenant-colonel had, however, heard of Serov.

"Serov? That same Serov who served with Rassokhin?"

He looked Serov over with keen interest, enquired in detail about his health, then, shaking his head doubtfully, said:

"H'm, we'll have to let Lieutenant-Colonel Lunin decide how to use you."

He too, like the general in Moscow, was surprised to learn that Serov had never seen Tatarenko. After a few more questions—about the Urals, about conditions in the rear—he ordered his duty orderly:

"Connect the Senior Lieutenant with Lunin's regiment."

And, to his joy, Serov soon afterwards heard over the telephone a voice saying:

"Captain Tararaksin on the line."

It was the voice of the regiment itself. Good old Tararaksin!

"Serov! Glad to know you're fit. Major Shakhbazyan sends you his greetings; he's standing here next to the phone; he says you're to report to the regiment. There's a car of ours at division. Have a look round for it and drive here in it. Deyev has just come into the command post; he sends you his greetings, too. See how many of us old-timers are still here."

Two hours later Serov reached the regiment.

The large airfield occupied by the regiment was crowded with aircraft. Sleek, powerful fighters of a type Serov did

not know stood on the runways; he saw them move into position, take off, form up in the air, fly away to fight, return and land; pilots with unfamiliar faces looked out of the cockpits and watched him quite indifferently as he walked across the field. Serov grew nervous. He suddenly felt very small and unwanted. Was this really his regiment, the one in whose ranks he had once fought, the regiment he had dreamed about so often when he lay in hospital? Would he be trusted with one of these aircraft? Would he ever learn to handle one? It was so long since he had held the stick.

He would have to ask someone the way to the command post. He noticed a broad-shouldered figure in a blue flying suit standing near an aircraft, his back to Serov.

Hearing Serov's footsteps the man turned round and Serov saw a familiar broad face reddened by sun and wind.

"Comrade Regiment Commander, Senior Lieutenant Serov reporting. . . ."

But he was not given a chance to finish.

Two strong hands grasped his shoulders. Lunin, panting with emotion, looked deep into his eyes. And at some distance, not daring to draw nearer, unknown young pilots gathered and whispered to each other with respectful surprise:

"It's Serov, *that* Serov!"

Serov and Lunin were not left on their own for long. Lunin was up to his neck in work, taking reports and issuing instructions. Over on the other side of the woods, where the front rumbled, fighting was going on continuously; aircraft were taking off or landing all the time. He did not have a moment to speak to Serov. However, from time to time he would cast him a friendly look out of the corner of an eye and Serov would realize that he had not forgotten about him. At last Lunin snatched a moment and called out to two young pilots:

"Karyakin! Ryabushkin! Take Senior Lieutenant Serov to the mess."

"Konstantin Ignatyevich, what are you going to give me to do?" asked Serov.

"We'll talk about that later. First thing is to have supper."

Flattered by their assignment Karyakin and Ryabushkin led Serov to the mess.

"There used to be a girl called Hilda at the mess," said Serov. "An Estonian."

"Hilda's here," said Karyakin. "She's probably in the kitchen. She'll be out in a minute."

However, it was not Hilda but a girl Serov did not know who served supper.

"Where's Hilda?" Karyakin asked her.

"She was here a minute ago," the girl replied. "I'll fetch her."

She went out and the men heard girls' voices through the wall.

"Where's Hilda? One of our old pilots is asking."

"Hilda, Hilda!"

"She's gone to the stores."

"She won't be long."

They had left the mess and were some way from it when they heard someone running after them. Serov turned round and saw Hilda.

Flushed with emotion and from the running she looked as pretty as ever. She shook Serov's hand hard and would not let it go. Her full red lips were curled in a smile but in her blue eyes, looking straight at Serov, there were tears.

"Now I'll be serving you again in the mess like before," she said.

Tears pricked Serov's eyes too. He and Hilda had so many memories in common.

"You remember, you remember?" he asked her.

Her eyes darkened.

"Oh, I keep them all here," she said solemnly laying a hand over her heart.

Then, with a toss of the head, she smiled at him again. "D'you hear that?"

Beyond the woods the unsleeping guns roared ceaselessly.

"Estonia lies over there," she went on. "Not far away. You and I were in Estonia together and we'll soon go back there together."

Hurrying to the command post Serov tried to limp as little as possible but there was one rotten thing about his limp—it got worse when he grew excited. At the command post—a dug-out built overnight—Major Shakhbazyan greeted him with a shout of joy. It appeared he knew all about the correspondence between Serov and Uvarov and had himself frequently begged Uvarov to help Serov get back to the regiment.

"Of course you had to come back," Shakhbazyan boomed. "You're one of the boys, a real old-timer. I said to Uvarov, 'Ivan Ivanovich, Serov grew up in the regiment, he fought in the regiment, he helped to form the regiment, and if the regiment has a good name that's some of Serov's doing, too. We just can't drop him!' "

He was certainly delighted to see Serov. Yet he was not quite sure whether Serov could be trusted with an aircraft straightaway. Serov guessed that from the over-detailed questions about his health, and he grew guarded and sullen in his replies to the chief of staff.

"You just have a look around," said Shakhbazyan. "There's no hurry. We'll soon find a way of using you."

Hearing for the third time that vague promise Serov's spirits fell. He dropped his head. But at that moment he heard Lunin's voice from a dark corner of the dug-out:

"But, Comrade Major, Serov's a pilot."

"I know that, Comrade Commander," said Shakhbazyan. "A fine pilot, I know."

"An outstanding pilot," said Lunin.

"But he hasn't flown for two years," said Shakhbazyan. "He's been severely wounded, he's not as strong as he was, he limps."

"He limps on the ground, he won't limp in the air," said Lunin. "I'm used to flying with him; he'll be my second as he was before. I've no doubt we'll manage to retrain him in a couple of weeks. Khromykh, take the Senior Lieutenant to our cabin and make up a bed for him next to mine."

Serov fell off to sleep the moment his head touched the pillow. But much later he awoke with a start and saw Lunin standing beside the next bed.

Lunin smiled at him.

"Konstantin Ignatyevich, I've got married," Serov said to his own surprise.

"To her?"

"Yes."

"That's good," said Lunin without much conviction.

"It's very good," said Serov.

Lunin sighed and got into bed without speaking. The conversation seemed to be over. But some ten minutes later Serov said softly:

"Are you asleep, Konstantin Ignatyevich?"

"No."

"There's something I wanted to ask you.... Was it you who brought that woman with the two children out of Leningrad? They were called Irina and Sergei."

Lunin did not reply at once. Then he sat up with a start.

"Was it her?"

"The very one."

"Well, then you're right," he said after a long pause. "Everything's very good."

4

One of the features of the double blow inflicted on the Germans outside Leningrad in '44 was the complex and highly synchronized co-operation established between the artillery, infantry and tanks and all three types of aviation—bombers, Stormoviks and fighters. Wet snow was falling and visibility was very poor yet. Nevertheless, Soviet bombers, with fighter protection, kept appearing every five minutes over the German lines and dropping their bombs. When shells and bombs had sown their havoc in the German defence belt heavy tanks poured through the gaps. But the tanks did not go alone, they were accompanied by Stormoviks. Each tank unit fought in combination with six small groups of Stormoviks which remained over the battlefield until another formation took over. And each group of Stormoviks had a group of fighters attached to it. The fighters protected both tanks and Stormoviks against attack from the air and carried out reconnaissance work, spotting the enemy's fire points and knots of resistance.

In the leading tank of each armoured column rode an air force liaison officer who was in constant radio communication with the fighters and Stormoviks.

"Comrade Captain, give us a job, please," a Stormovik pilot would say over the radio to the liaison officer in the tank. And the liaison officer would open the turret, look around and reply: "Over there on the left. See those two tanks? One of them's ours. He's in a scrap. The black one's the Panzer. See them?"

"Yes. I'll help him straightaway."

The Stormovik would alter course and its sombre shadow would sweep through the falling snow over the German tank. An explosion followed immediately.

"How did it go, Comrade Captain?" the pilot would ask, curious to know the result of his work.

"Fair enough."

When the tanks ran into heavy fire and found it difficult to locate the enemy artillery the air force liaison would shout:

"Tatarenko, find out where they're firing from!"

The fighters, skimming through the mist almost at ground level, would spot the German anti-tank batteries and the Stormoviks would be told what to do.

"How did it go?"

"Fair enough. No complaints down here."

Tatarenko's squadron had been accompanying tanks and Stormoviks in these battles since the first day of the offensive. Fighting in such close harmony with the ground forces was no simple matter, but it was new and exciting. In combat conditions it was not possible to divide duties according to a precise pattern—sometimes the tanks and the Stormoviks did the reconnoitring and left the storming to the fighters. And when, flying ahead of the tanks on reconnaissance, the fighters spotted a column of enemy troops or lorries at some cross-roads they did not even wait for the Stormoviks to come up and launched the attack themselves.

Tatarenko soon acquired a liking for this kind of attack. The fighters had not the means that Stormoviks possessed to destroy blockhouses and pillboxes; they had to look out for Germans in the open air and that required special alertness and speed on the part of the pilot who had to know how to conceal his aircraft in a shred of mist or beyond the tree-tops. The wet weather, with mist that clung almost to the ground and frequent squalls of snow or rain, while creating extremely difficult conditions for flying in general, helped the fighters to carry out their strafing attacks. These attacks were a stern test of all the qualities of a fighter-pilot: to take part in them he needed to have excellent control of his aircraft and guns, to be able to grasp any situation in a flash and to know how to find his bearings in almost total darkness. Tatarenko's squadron was one of the first fighter squad-

rons on the Baltic to master the art of strafing the enemy's ground forces in co-operation with tanks.

The two groups of Soviet armies advanced towards each other, and a few days after the opening of the offensive the forces attacking from Oranienbaum were within earshot of the forces advancing from Leningrad and the Pulkovo Heights. Narrower and narrower became the corridor through which the German units, dug in at the southwestern approaches to Leningrad, maintained connection with their main forces. But they were reluctant to leave Leningrad. It seemed they relished too much the pleasure of shelling the city, of destroying its houses and killing women and children. They went on pumping shells into Leningrad. And it was this wicked and senseless amusement that caused their destruction—when they came to their senses it was too late. Abandoning their guns and motor transport they retreated through the wet snow from Ligovo, Strelna and Peterhof into the narrow corridor between the two Soviet forces. But the corridor went on narrowing; they were caught under cross-fire and the running soldiers fled over the bodies of those who had attempted to escape before them. In an effort to widen the corridor the German command threw all its Panzers into action on that sector, but they were met by Soviet tanks, Stormoviks and fighters.

"Comrade Captain, give us a job, please."

"Over there to starboard, Tatarenko. The Germans are trying to get away through the woods."

A turn over the woods. A short strafing.

"How did it go, Comrade Captain?"

"Fair enough."

Although there were many Soviet fighter squadrons the Germans distinguished Tatarenko's squadron from the others and were in deadly fear of it, greatly exaggerating its strength. In their reports they used to describe it with high-flown phrases like "a squadron of veteran Soviet aces," not imagining that these "veteran aces," these "ex-

perienced and invulnerable masters of air-fighting" were a handful of beardless Russian youths not one of whom had known how to fly an aircraft at the beginning of the war. Nor could they imagine that the commander of these "veteran aces" was not yet twenty-two; they did not know that he was in love for the first time in his life and that returning to the station after battle he would timidly and shyly enquire whether there was a letter for him from Leningrad, which had now become a city in the rear.

On January 20 the two Soviet groups joined up near Ropsha. Seven German divisions occupying positions right up against Leningrad were cut off and were soon annihilated. In killed alone the Germans lost over twenty thousand men in a few days. The Soviet forces captured about two hundred guns, including thirty-six siege guns which the Germans had used to shell Leningrad.

As the result of this rout a broad gap was torn in the German lines and into this the Soviet forces poured rapidly, advancing towards Volosovo, Pushkin and Suida and to the banks of the Luga and Narova—westwards.

The air regiment had to move to the west. The order had just been received: they had to transfer to another station which had been liberated only a few hours before. In the command post dug-out intense preparations for the departure were in progress. Telephones rang, Tararaksin never stopped talking, orderlies were going through the familiar process of packing staff property into sacks. People ran in, took their orders from Lunin or Shakhbazyan and ran out again, their boots clattering on the planks laid over the squelching mud. In spite of the routine appearance of all this hurry-scurry there was a tangible air of celebration about it. To the west! To the west!

Slava Bystrov was there too. Slava was over fourteen now—a round-faced, tow-headed youngster in oily dungarees, so tall for his age that every time Lunin saw him—and

he saw him every day—he could not resist saying: "Eh, how you're shooting up."

While waiting for the order to get into the transport aircraft which was to take the ground staff to the new station, Slava sat in a dark corner of the dug-out listening to Kostin and Ryabushkin.

"In a few years the aircraft we're flying now will be museum pieces," said Kostin.

Ryabushkin listened to him sceptically. This slight on the regiment's aircraft offended him.

"They're the best in the world," he retorted.

Kostin compressed his lips stubbornly.

"If you could only imagine the aircraft you and I will be flying in three years' time."

"And can you imagine them?" Ryabushkin ventured.

"Oh well, I've got some sort of an idea."

To tell the truth, what Kostin imagined was rather vague and Slava, realizing that, pouted scornfully. Slava himself was always inventing and improving aircraft. The exercise books in which he did his lessons for Deyev were covered with drawings of strange winged monsters. In argument he often got the better of Kostin because he had a better knowledge than Kostin of aircraft engines and aerodynamics and felt more at home among mathematical formulas. Slava turned out to have a real bent for maths and as Deyev was strong in this field, too, they had gone on together far past the standards required by the school curriculum. Slava had already decided what he was going to be when he grew up: an engineer building new types of aircraft.

Uvarov came into the dug-out and everyone rose. He brought with him Lunin's old friend Captain Khovrin, editor of the division paper. Khovrin was making a tour of stations with Uvarov and was astonished and excited by everything he saw—the defeat and rout of the Germans, the final liberation of Leningrad, the vast scale of the Soviet offensive.

During the war years Khovrin had made a remarkable recovery in health. His face had lost that sallow, sickly look; he was now quite rosy-cheeked. He no longer stooped, and looked taller and broader in the shoulders. When Lunin met him the first time he had looked hopelessly civilian but now he held himself so erect that anyone would think he had spent his life in the army.

Khovrin was delighted to see Lunin. He thought it was wonderful that they should have met again during these very days when Leningrad had been fully liberated. Why, they had met on the locomotive and then got into the lorry and driven to Leningrad only a few hours before the noose had closed round the city. How long ago that seemed now!

"And that petrol tank, you remember that tank?" he asked.

Evidently the recollection gave him great pleasure. Then he remembered how they had met during the hungry Leningrad winter of '42 at the flat of Sharapov, that clerk in the political department, and how Lunin had asked him to help a woman with two children to get out of the city, saying that they were his own family.

"You are a poor liar, Lieutenant-Colonel," said Khovrin with a laugh. "Sharapov and I didn't believe you for a moment."

Lunin looked at his watch.

"Time to leave."

With Uvarov's permission he left the dug-out and walked towards the aircraft. Most of the others followed him.

Uvarov, Khovrin and Shakhbazyan stayed a little longer in the dug-out. They were talking about Lunin.

"He told me once he'd been married but had divorced," said Khovrin. "Did you know that?" he asked Uvarov.

"Yes, I knew," said Uvarov.

"Fell out of love, I suppose," suggested Shakhbazyan.

"Oh no, it wasn't that," said Uvarov.

"Did he tell you?" asked Khovrin.

"No, he didn't, but I know," said Uvarov. "He's the sort of man whose love doesn't change."

"Yes, there are such people," said Khovrin.

Lunin, meanwhile, had taken off and was flying with the whole regiment behind him. It was the first frosty day of the winter and it was already nearly over. Suddenly the wind dispersed the clouds and ahead, in the west, the huge red ball of the sun appeared, hanging low over the forest. Lunin flew straight into the sun and all his aircraft flew after him in a mighty formation, so many of them that they filled the entire sky almost as far as the eye could see. They were bringing freedom and hope, they were bringing the future to the people, and there was no power in the world that could stop them.

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